NEW WINESKINS for OLD WINE

By Delbert Wiens

A Study of the Mennonite Brethren Church
EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The preparation of this study has been long and painstaking. It has meant much heart-searching and prayerful analysis on the part of the author. It is, we are convinced, an honest effort to help the brotherhood serve the Lord more effectively in this space age. Some of the thinking of this study was presented in lectures at the Southern District Family Camp at Estes Park, Colorado, July 5-9, 1965.

The author, Delbert Wiens, has served as instructor in philosophy and English at Tabor College the last three years. The year prior to that he taught at Corn Bible Academy in Corn, Oklahoma. A former Tabor College student, Wiens received the A. B. degree from Fresno State College in 1953. The next three years he spent in relief work in Vietnam under the Mennonite Central Committee. Subsequently he attended Yale Divinity School where he was granted the B. D. degree in 1961. Beginning this fall, he is continuing graduate studies toward a doctorate at the University of Chicago.

We know that perhaps no one will agree with everything this study says. Some may agree with certain parts and disagree with others. This we expect. Though this study does not give the easy and pat solutions we might like to see, it discusses issues and systems which our brotherhood must face with urgency, courage, earnestness, and faith, and for which it must find solutions. Unless we do, we will be the losers spiritually.

Because we have the conviction that facing these issues is intensely important, we are bringing this study to every reader of the Christian Leader. We ask you to read it carefully, prayerfully, and repeatedly. Let us seek the message God has for us in this study. Let us do this without preconceived conclusions or solutions. Whether you agree with the analysis of this study or not, we will appreciate it if you will write your reactions to the Christian Leader.

Nor is this study limited to Mennonite Brethren. In varying degrees the systems analyzed here are true of all Christendom. We therefore would welcome the circulation of this study in church circles other than Mennonite Brethren. Additional reprints are available from the Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, Box 1, Hillsboro, Kansas 67063, for 25 cents each as long as the supply lasts. You will notice that this study is a special insert which can be removed from the Leader and kept as a separate booklet.

Black inked remarks:

Made in March 1974

Copyright 1965 by
Mennonite Brethren Publishing House
Hillsboro, Kansas

Printed in U. S. A.
INTRODUCTION

Sociologists point out that a person belongs to that group whose history he affirms to be his own. As an American, I speak of "our founding fathers," as if William Bradford, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson really were my ancestors. Literally, this is untrue. My fathers came from Russia in the 1870's. And their fathers came from Prussia. But the events of my history have cast me with an English-speaking people who claim a certain past, and I have affirmed that their past is also my past. Of course, I could choose to emigrate to some other country, and adopt another history. But I have not chosen to do this. And so, I am an American.

I am also an "M. B." I have affirmed that my history includes my parents. It also includes eighteen schismatics in Russia a hundred years ago. It includes Menno Simons and the Anabaptists. I am a Christian. And so my history includes Martin Luther, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Gregory VIII, the Apostle Paul, and all that "cloud of witnesses" who are the Church. And, preeminently, my history includes Jesus Christ. These all belong to my past. I affirm them now. And so they are part of my present. Because their hope is mine, they belong also to my future.

If I am to know who I am and what I am becoming, then I must discover my past, try to understand it, build upon it. That is the work of a lifetime, a work that I cannot complete without the experience of those who are older than I. I need to listen to my elders and to read history and literature to discover what really happened to those who, by belonging to my past, have created my present.

No man can cut himself off from his past and remain a whole man. No man can grow beyond his present limitations unless he affirms those circumstances that have helped to form him. No church can build more grandly except it test well the foundations it has had bequeathed to it.

But such a search into my past (and into our past) is more than a search for myself. It can also be an act of worship. For if God has led our fathers, then a discovery of our past is also a discovery of the acts of God. To reject the history of our Anabaptist-Mennonite past and, beyond it, the history of all the churches of Christ is to cut ourselves off from the knowledge of God. Not to learn about the history of the church is to live in ignorance. If this is done willfully, it involves a denial of the meaning of God's working—and is blasphemy.

Moreover, such ignorance would be a kind of suicide. We shall hardly understand what it will mean to transmit our heritage unless we understand it. "Enlargement" is senseless unless we can discriminate between that which is worthy of growth and that which is not, unless we can differentiate between the essential meaning of that to which God has called us and those more or less passing forms which are needed to transmit that meaning.

It is difficult to see the past with clarity. Our wish to defend what has been good and to flee what has been painful clouds our vision. Perhaps it is only with chastened love, that one should be permitted to speak. Without love for our past, we shall hardly find the grace to come to terms with it. Without chastening we shall surely be led astray by sentiment.

What follows is my attempt to come to terms with our common past insofar as my sketchy knowledge and sometimes overactive imagination permits. Where knowledge and imagination fail, I will welcome correction. Where love fails, I ask forgiveness. I would rather stir you up to think deeply on these things than have you agree with me in all details. I ask only that you read it all before you judge my motives or ideas.

—Delbert Wiens

Imagination must be stressed. It has become almost embarrassing that my act of "guessing what must have been to produce me and my peers" has come to be treated as "history." Before writing this I had read almost no Mennonite history. Nor had I read solid, objective history. Of course, much of it was "in the air," at seminary, etc.
1. HOW DID WE BECOME "M. B.s"?

An adequate answer to this question would fill a very large book. It is important that that book be written, though I do not propose to do so. In the first place, this will require a history of our church, a history that takes into account more than the last one hundred years or so. For we have been, and are, Mennonites as well as Mennonite Brethren. And before Conrad Grebel and Menno Simons we were Catholics. It is important to understand that also if we are to understand ourselves.

And so we desperately need historians. As yet, we have no "history." We have one or two books which are sketches on a popular level. We have essays and document compilations by P. M. Friesen and A. H. Unruh. Perhaps as a group we have not yet reached the necessary maturity to produce a self-conscious, reflective history. The time for one may not be too far away. This year the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society was formed in Hilleboro, Kansas, and Fresno, California. At least we are becoming conscious of the need to come to terms with our past.

But our question also demands another kind of response. Almost all of us can answer it with one or both of the following statements: "I was born in a Mennonite Brethren home" and "I was converted and joined a Mennonite Brethren church." We would like to believe that the second response is the determinative one. But, in fact, it has proved difficult to separate the two statements. How has this come about?

Conversion

Let us begin by imagining what conversion must have meant to our great-grandfathers a hundred years ago. They lived in a Mennonite society that had replaced a vital Christian faith with a body of beliefs and practices. They were separated from non-Mennonites, but had come to allow evils in their own midst. They claimed to be a brotherhood and yet permitted an economic system that made landless laborers out of many. They were "orthodox" but had no witness. Certain vices had become common. Obviously something was drastically wrong.

And so a number of dissatisfied brethren began to meet together to search for something to fill their hungry souls. They were not educated, and they did not begin with answers. So they were quite open to receive help from wherever it could be found ... from their knowledge of Anabaptism, from Pietistic Lutheranism, from neighboring German Baptists, and from the Scriptures as they struggled together to discover its meaning.

After much struggle, a new experience came to them. They found forgiveness for their sins, a new spirit of shared spiritual treasure, a new relationship to God and to each other. There is no doubt that in the exultation of this new experience they did some fairly silly things; and, in their openness, some of them were easy prey to the fanatical fringe that is always attracted to movements of fresh life. But even the excesses must stand as testimony to the fact that grace was present. Without a great many theological preconceptions, they lived in open trust that the God who had found them would lead them into a way of life pleasing to Him.

But one cannot simply live in an experience or in a relationship. There comes a time when one must also think and talk about it. One must talk about the experience when one is forced to explain to outsiders what has happened. One who has discovered new life cannot but wish to share it with others. And certainly such a person would want to teach his children so that they also could come to partake of this experience. Both witnessing and teaching require reflection, thought about the experience. But however necessary the shift may be, it is a dangerous change of focus.

It is not possible to teach an experience. Direct confrontation with God cannot be automatically transmitted in a testimony—or in a lecture either. All that is possible is that one talk about the experience, in the hope that such a hunger will be created in the other person that he will also be open to be led into his own confrontation with God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Two Ways to Think About Conversion

At first the sheer enthusiasm of their discovery could overcome our fathers' inexperience and ignorance. But gradually they learned to organize their presentations more systematically.

And so our great-grandfathers developed two sorts of explanations to interpret their experience. There was in the first place, the psychological explanation, a description of how they felt during the experience. Although there were individual differences here, they discovered that they could reduce the subjective side of the experience to a general pattern. First they had felt lost, empty, dissatisfied. This led to search for God. But contemplation of God revealed not only emptiness but also sin, self-assertion, guilt. And then came a violent struggle to "give in" to God, followed by a shattering experience and then peace. "For two weeks (three weeks, four weeks) I struggled with God. I could not eat or sleep. I felt that hell was swallowing me up. Then one day I could not stand it any longer. I stopped the horses and threw myself beside the plow and gave myself to God. Then, oh, the peace that came over me when my sins rolled away." Surely we remember such testimonies.
Such an experience can be seen as a series of stages. Hindsight is able to construct a list of steps to this "salvation." Thought about the experience can abstract the subjective form of the experience. And this form can be taught. Those interested in the shape of this form need only to consult a basic text in personal evangelism (see the chapters on conversion in The Varieties of Religious Experience by William James). This same pattern was also true of the church at Pentecost. After the living experience they developed their teachings on the form of that experience.

But there is also an objective side to any experience. And so, in the second place, the brethren required a description of those things which had to be true if the experience was to be possible. This is the doctrinal description, the dogmas. For example, a full description of the drive I took yesterday will include not only the subjective causes (why I felt like going, the feelings I had while driving, the tiredness it produced, and the like), but also the necessary objective factors (there were roads, my car is in operating condition, gas burns, and so on).

Now the objective factors which our fathers believed to be necessary were that God exists, that He has such and such a nature, that there must be a mediator between His holiness and our humanness, and the like. All the creeds of the church are attempts the church makes to systematize that which it finds to be the necessary conditions of its actual existence and experience.

So, whenever we testify or teach we are doing one or both of these two things. We are giving a description of the subjective form of our experience and we are giving a description of those factors which make the experience possible. But we are not teaching the experience. The attempt to do these things is very like the attempt of a college boy who is very much in love trying to describe the feeling to his inhibited roommate. Some things just cannot be taught. At best he can hope to stimulate in his friend the willingness to be caught.

The Shift from "IN" to "ABOUT" Changes the Experience

But there are unavoidable dangers in this necessary progress from living in an experience to teaching about the experience. There is always the danger of imagining that the form of one’s own experience is the only legitimate form. There is also a good chance that one’s understanding of the objective or subjective conditions of one’s experience will be considered the only legitimate interpretation. To overcome this narrowness, an honest attempt to enter into the experience of other Christians is necessary.

One reason we become insular is the desire to preserve the purity of our own belief. But here something ironic and tragic happens. The very attempt to preserve and transmit the experience leads us to alter it. Let us trace this process.

The first generation had this experience as adults. Indeed, many were already middle-aged. For a generation or two conversions usually occurred among young adults. But what if Christ should come between "accountability" and young adulthood? And what about the danger that some of the youth would become set in their worldliness? Better that they be converted while they are still "tender."

Moreover, the fathers discovered that the form of the conversion experience could be duplicated at younger and still younger ages. A child has a very plastic psyche. He can learn to produce on his own level the form of almost any subjective experience. He can be taught at six to follow the guilt-release experience in the same sequence as did his great-grandfather at thirty-six. We do not need to deny that this experience may be sincere. But it seems to me to be nonsense to assert that the experience at six has the same meaning that it had to another at thirty-six—even if the subjective form is similar.

Perhaps some of this difference can be seen by looking at the words that are used to describe the experience. Both claim to have been converted. For the great-grandfather this had a quite specific meaning. He was a mature person with a formed character. But this was a self-centered, and therefore sinful, character. He had probably frequented the saloons, gambled, cheated in one way or another. Conversion meant a new way of life, a turning around. He ceased to live one kind of life and began another.

Our six-year-old also says that he has been converted. But what does it mean to him? Basically he has affirmed, at whatever level is possible for him, that he has placed himself in the only way of life that he has ever really known. He also knows that he has sinned, that he has not always lived up to the expectations of our Mennonite Brethren-Christian way. And so the other meaning of his conversion and subsequent baptism is that his lapses have been forgiven. Unlike his great-grandfather, he has never really known a different way of life.

Like conversion, the word faith has also undergone a subtle change. For the great-grandfather this word denoted a new kind of attitude, his response of trust appropriate to the God who met him in personal confrontation. One could trust this kind of heavenly Father who comes in holiness but also in forgiving love. Great-grandfather did not have all the answers. He did not need them. He could trust his daily walk and even his uncertainties to the God whose presence with him had been so certain. Faith basically meant trust.

But what about his great-grandchildren? They have been taught a set of objective dogmas. Through this teaching, by the power of the Spirit, they may also find themselves confronted by God. But many mistake the teaching for the experience. And so faith comes to mean, not trust, but belief, that is, the mental acceptance of the truth of the sets of descriptors. But belief and trust are two quite different things.

When Experience Contradicts the Descriptions

These changes in the meaning of our experiences place an almost unbearable strain upon us. Our actual practice is now in conflict with our doctrines. For we claim that the descriptions of the experiences of our great-grandfathers still apply to our own quite different experiences.

This is one reason we are attracted to testimonies by reformed gangsters and Hollywood types. We are even
more thrilled when such an outsider is converted in our
churches. Here is the pattern we profess to want. (Did
not our great-grandfathers teach us that conversion means
this kind of radical change?) Here is the "ideal" that
we have worked hard to make impossible. (Do we not
work hard to prevent our children from becoming sinners
who need so radical a change?)

Of course, in spite of our best efforts, the growing
child does continue to miss the mark we have set for him.
It periodically becomes clear to the child that he is not
able to keep true to the way that he has affirmed as his
own. And so guilt builds up until, either in some lonely
crisis with self-will or in the emotion-loaded setting of
a revival meeting, he once again affirms his intention to
walk in the Christian way and once again finds relief
from his guilt. He has "rededicated his life." Sometimes
this pattern is repeated many times.

Finally, usually during late adolescence, the young
person's growing capacity for self-understanding permits
him to think about his past experiences. He is a differ-
ent person now than he was at six. And now, perhaps
for the first time, another way of life becomes a live
possibility.

What is the meaning now of that barely remembered
conversion? How was it different from the "rededica-
tions"? All of them were basically affirmations that he
was choosing the only way of life he had been taught.
And all of these experiences provided release from guilt
in the assurance of forgiveness. How can the first of a
series count as the once-and-for-all-time conversion? At
this point the young person is forced to become skeptical
of the meaning of his experiences. He is forced to doubt
whether he has ever been saved.

And now the contradiction between a teaching de-
veloped from the conversion experiences of the great-grand-
fathers and the fact of his own experience catches up
with the young person. Has he not been taught that
conversion is a radical changing of the way? How can he
be sure of salvation unless he has first lived as a non-
Christian?

To this is added the normal series of crises involved
in becoming an adult. The young person is to give him-
self to God. But who is he? He is changing so rapidly
that the possible boundaries of his selfhood are almost
completely out of sight. How then can he know the pos-
sibilities of his own self unless he experiments with all of
the ways open to him? Is he forced to whole seriously
his idea of dedication until he discovers what it is
that has to be dedicated.

Tragically enough, our very teaching about conver-
sion helps to create the necessity of doubt and the rebel-
lion which leads to that sinful position from which the young
person can meaningfully turn in a "conversion" that will
match the experience of his great-grandfather's. (The
implications for ethics will be discussed in the following
essay.)

Other Effects

Unfortunately (?) not all the young people follow
this pattern. An overly sincere, conscientious child may
be so severely damaged by the process of being cut to fit
the pattern that he loses (at least for a time) the capacity
to respond with integrity of self.

Such a person, if he is reflective and intelligent
enough, may come to understand that many of the ap-
peals that moved him to shattering bouts with the mour-
er's bench were themselves unwise attempts to bring psy-
chological pressure to bear on a psyche too tender to
withstand. With bitterness he will come to see that
what he took for the prompting of the Holy Spirit was
the voice of a more or less deluded Christian playing
on the inevitable guilt feelings in order to rack up spiritual
scars. Unless the bitterness subsides, such a victim
may never desire to open himself to the genuine convic-
ting power of the Holy Spirit. If he adds cynicism to bit-
terness, he may never believe that beyond the butchery of
artificially stimulated guilt there is the healing pain that
accompanies the deeper surgery of the Holy Spirit.

The effect on the less reflective is almost as devas-
tating. They may remain sincere, but they can hardly
avoid becoming neurotics who never learn to distinguish
between false guilt and true guilt, and who are therefore
bound forever to soul-destroying anxiety. Like "stink-
weeds growing under a basket" they live out lives that
are only a pale, drooping travesty of that fullness of char-
acter that is promised the sons of God.

Those with tougher souls learn to roll with the emo-
tional punches. They do not seem to feel them so deeply.
While such a person may maintain his own integrity, he
may be so toughened by the necessity of withstanding the
artificial drafts that are stirred up by our emotional ap-
ppeals that he loses sensitivity to the Spirit who, like the
wind, blows where he lists. Such a one may become a
number on the church roll. Or he may become an un-
complicated unbeliever. But he is hardly likely to un-
derstand what Christianity can be.

A Theology of Nurture Is Lacking

By now it is clear that something is wrong with our
actual practice. What we are more reluctant to admit
is that something may also be wrong with our doctrine.
We have abstracted from the experience of our grandfa-
thers, an experience that was quite limited, however gen-
ue which may have been. The problem for the grandfathers
was to make a highly visible, dramatic change of life.
Of course, there was growth afterward. But the point of
conversion itself was in the once-in-a-lifetime wrenching
that guaranteed their new status. They had indeed
placed themselves on a new road. They had turned
around. They had been converted.

The pattern of their experience will repeat itself
wherever adult pagans are confronted by the Gospel. The
experiences of our great-grandfathers were similar to those
which accompanied the revivals of the American frontier.
The appeal there was to pagans or to semi-pagans. (The
"Bible-belt" churches which derive from the frontier re-
vivals have the same sorts of problems that we have—
without some of the strengths we derive from our Men-
nonite culture.) The patterns will be similar wherever
adult sinners respond to God's invitation and reject their
former way of life.

But the once-for-all-time character of the adult re-
sponse to salvation does not apply to children in the same
fashion. For the adult knows what he is surrendering. His self is formed. This is not true for the child. He is not yet fully accountable for himself. Indeed, he is not yet "himself." So much is true about the doctrine of the age of accountability. But we do not become who we are in one big jump. There is no one point at which we suddenly become accountable. As we grow, boundaries of our selfhood deepen and widen.

To apply the methods which are appropriate for adult pagans to half-formed children is to run the risk of doing them irreparable harm. To force them to repeat the patterns appropriate for adult pagans is to distort the genuine relationship with God that the child is experiencing. For I believe that God meets us in appropriate ways throughout our lives.

Because we have a theology of conversion appropriate to adults but no adequate theology of Christian nurture, we know what to do with pagans but not what to do with our own children. (Is this why some ministers feel more comfortable preaching evangelistic sermons to pagans, even if none are present, than feeding the flock of God that sits before them?)

Yes, our great-grandfathers were converted. Yes, our children also must be converted; they must be born "from above." But a deeper understanding of the meaning of conversion is needed if the young are to escape the need for a shallow kind of half-deliberate rebellion so that grace may abound to them also. (In Part Two I will offer some suggestions toward the answering of some of the questions which this description raises.)

**Baptism**

The question of accountability raises the knotty problem of the status of children who are growing up in our churches.

In fact, we feel that a child reared in a godly home is already a participant in the fellowship of the church. We insist that our children are not outside the community of grace, and we make dubious use of the doctrine of the age of accountability to justify our assurance that "unconverted" children will go to heaven. (We have come to believe that a child can be "saved" at six and on that basis we baptize him at seven or eight. Yet should another child who does not repeat this pattern, die at nine or ten, we comfort ourselves that he has not yet reached the age of accountability.)

Yes, we believe that children will go to heaven; but they cannot, in any official sense, be members of the present community of Christ. They must first go through the forms of conversion and baptism. And baptism, by our definition, is adult baptism. It was, our ancestors insisted, the sign of a fully self-conscious, mature decision to join a group of people who had covenanted together to be the Church of Christ and to live together in ways appropriate to that calling.

The principle assumes that an adult chooses to join a particular group from his position outside that group. Of course, this is precisely what happens for any first generation. But it does not fit the experience of subsequent generations, especially not where child "conversion" has become the rule.

When principle comes into conflict with reality, we will continue to repeat the principle, but we practice the reality. In this case, our deep sense that our children are, insofar as their capacity permits, living in what we have defined as the Christian way leads us to feel that it is all right to ratify that status in early baptisms. And so we have, in actual fact, accepted child baptism.

But even our child baptisms at eight or nine years of age (in some cases even younger) do not really answer the problem. (It is difficult to give a good answer to an unbaptized child of eight who feels he is a part of the church and who is distressed at the exclusion from the communion table.) And so we have begun to symbolize the fact that our babies are members of our community through infant dedications. These came very easily in the days when the practice was for a true "fish and fowl." They neither express the truth that children born in godly homes are early led to walk in godly ways nor do they express the decision of an adult who knows what he is renouncing.

I am sure that our grandfathers have not left us with all the right answers, but I am confident that they had "right" attitudes, and for this we ought to honor them. With their attitude of openness and trust, we can search together to discover God's will for us. For has not God met us in a holy confrontation? And did we not learn in that confrontation to call him "Father"? And therefore can we not trust Him to save us "and our house"?

**2. HOW DO WE ACT?**

Many concerned people in our churches are convinced that we are experiencing a decline of moral behavior. We have had customs, and these customs are eroding away before the social changes sweeping our world. We have had rules, and I agree that we are not only seeing these rules broken, we are also seeing them scoffed at. We have taught a strict morality, and it is true that there is much immorality, not only among the youth.

Professor J. A. Loewen told us that when his parents visited him at his university several years ago, the latest hair style on campus was a severe bun. When he suggested that his mother might wish to wear a hat to avoid attracting attention to her modishness, his father was stunned. "Wann dann es schließlich rächt?" Then what is right? And what is wrong? Ethics is the thoughtful investigation of that problem. For various reasons, we have done little ethical thinking beyond an elementary level. And therein lies much of the explanation for the very real crisis we are facing.

To understand our condition, let us begin again with the great-grandfathers. They were all farmers or in farm-allied businesses. The sons were expected to follow the occupation of their fathers. They were expected to live pretty much the same kind of lives their fathers lived. It is difficult for us to imagine that sort of stable society. It would have been more difficult for them to imagine living in a society characterized by ceaseless change and unlimited opportunity.
In such a stable society life can be lived according to the customs handed down from parents to children. In the course of centuries, a distilled folk wisdom had taught an appropriate response to each situation. Such a body of teaching is captured in proverbs and is adequate as long as no great upset changes the conditions of that society (Low German, by the way, has a rich deposit of such old sayings).

Our Mennonite Brethren founders did not turn away from this body of conventions which governed their day-to-day behavior, from courting practices to agricultural methods, to Zwieback baking on Saturday. It seems that only severe social changes break up customary behavior. One such shock came with the move to the American Midwest. Here they tried to recreate their German-Russian patterns, but it could not be.

In the first place, they were forced to live on their farms rather than in small villages. Though they did not foresee the results, their old customs were doomed from that time. They were no longer, in principle, members of a close society. Each one now became a king on his own quarter section. It would be hard to imagine a more effective means for destroying old-world culture and guaranteeing that we would finally homogenize into a common “Americanism” than the Homestead Act, which offered a quarter section free only if the settler lived on it.

(What should replace the old customs? Which ones should we keep? Which will be required if we are to preserve our identity as a group? When do they hinder evangelization? These are important questions, but I do not propose to discuss them directly in this essay.)

Following their conversion, our great-grandfathers found that they faced decisions that could not be answered with reference to those customary rules. Indeed, it was clear to them that their conversion into a “new creature” required a new way of life that went beyond the guidance of custom.

There were both negative and positive aspects to this new life. They had to stop doing certain things that they had been doing, and they had to begin to do certain things that they had not been doing. Judging from the results, I would suspect that the process went something like this:

The “Thou Shalt Not”

How were they to determine what is sin and should be stopped? Of course, certain sins are obvious. Some are specifically named in the Scriptures. Others clearly leave destructive results. The difficulty comes when they tried to determine those that were not so clear. What about moderate drinking and smoking? Later on questions arose about buying life insurance, modesty of dress, radio, swimming on Sunday, television, bowling, and the like.

Within the Russian Mennonite setting, the early Mennonite Brethren found one of their greatest problems to be that of their relation to the rest of the community. At first, they evidently wished to act as a leaven within the established churches. But, through mistakes on both sides, this was not to be; and they found themselves being forced to identify themselves as over-against, as different from, the other Mennonites. This situation was exacerbated after moving to the Midwest, for this was a tough, wild country. Out of these special circumstances, the other Mennonites. This situation was exacerbated after moving to the Midwest, for this was a tough, wild country. Out of these special circumstances, our fathers derived a principle by which the “Thou Shalt Not” could be determined.

They were forced to draw clear lines between themselves and the “worldly.” And so they were provided with a principle for establishing what is sin and what is not. Their conversion required that they cease doing those things that are typical of the unregenerate and which take place in the company of the unregenerate. They had to “come out from among them and be separate.” If one is doubtless whether a certain act is sinful, one need only ask whether the doing of that act tends to blur this line of separation so that it brings him into too close contact with the “worldly.”

Examples

Let us use several examples to show how this works. In Russia, the Mennonite villages had saloons, which were not always known to foster decent behavior. On the frontier in America the saloons were downright tough. It was obvious to them that frequenting such places was wrong for those who had changed their style of life. But it was not, originally, the alcohol that was sinful. Many of our good brethren continued to make moderate amounts of home brew. Later on (under the influence of the Prohibitionist movement in America) our church came to think that the sin was in the drinking of alcoholic beverages as such rather than in being in the company of those who frequent saloons.

Also revealing is the position our church took when removing the ban on the purchase of life insurance. An older man has told me how, in the early ’80’s, he and several other young men had decided that they wanted to purchase life insurance and petitioned their district conference to remove the ban on it. It was not held, originally, the alcohol that was sinful. Many of our good brethren continued to make moderate amounts of home brew. Later on (under the influence of the Prohibitionist movement in America) our church came to think that the sin was in the drinking of alcoholic beverages as such rather than in being in the company of those who frequent saloons.

Also revealing is the position our church took when removing the ban on the purchase of life insurance. An older man has told me how, in the early ’90’s, he and several other young men had decided that they wanted to purchase life insurance and petitioned their district conference to remove the ban on it. The matter was discussed. When the leaders were asked why life insurance was sin, they responded that it had been banned because originally it had been necessary to join lodges to purchase it. The young men needed only to point out that this was no longer the case in order to have the ban lifted. Now I doubt that this was the original reason. But in any case it is clear that the principle on which the conference acted was that the act ceased to be sin when it no longer identified one with the unregenerate.

That this principle has severe limitations has become clear since the invention of radio. Here was a device that brought the world into the home without transferring the Christian into the actual company of the godless. The first reaction was to condemn it. But this could not stand, for one could pretend that the basic principle had not been transgressed. The possession of a radio was neither the exclusive right of sinners nor did it throw one into their physical presence. And so, by default rather than by clear thought, radio was permitted.

Movies, of course, were not. The Christian church has always been suspicious of dramatics. But no society, as far as I know, is able to live for long without some form of drama . . . and for very good reasons. And so our churches began to use rudimentary dialogues, Christmas tableaux, and the like.
So, drama itself came to be regarded as suspect but permissible. But Hollywood was (and is) a very symbol of immorality, infidelity, and lostness. It is, even by its own definition, a symbol of worldliness. And the local theater participated in that aura. For our fathers it did not matter that good could come even from Hollywood. Films did not need to be judged on their merits; the sin consisted in entering the cinema. For this was to identify oneself with the world. This meant participation in an activity symbolic of the world.

Then came television. Now Hollywood could be brought inside the home. No theater door need be darkened by our shadow. And so we capitulated. Now badly tattered, the principle of separation could be further trimmed. We were not mixing with the world personally, physically. We were not supporting Hollywood by paying directly for the shows we could now see.

As a result, our present stand is completely hopeless! Live drama is all right. We are far enough from Broadway (and its publicity is less effective) that we do not need to make it the symbol that Hollywood is. And we have live drama in our churches, don’t we? Very well, last summer a superior production of Hamlet was staged in New York. Had I been there I would have gone to see it and I would have had a clear conscience.

But I may not enter a movie theater. One night in New York someone took a movie camera into that production of Hamlet and filmed it. Several months later that film was shown in a theater in Wichita. Here I am not supposed to see it. And so I did not go. But this is ridiculous!

Cinerama provides another instructive object lesson. At first this process of movie-making concentrated on scenery with little or no story line. Moreover, because of the wide screen it could not be projected in ordinary theaters. So it was shown in civic auditoriums. Well, that was all right. Then, in large cities, special theaters were built for it. These had not been “polluted” with ordinary films. So that was all right. Then the plots for the films developed. At present there is no significant difference between a cinerama theater and any other. But it is still “all right.” After all, it is cinerama.

I believe that these examples are adequate to prove that our basic rule for determining what we shall not do is not “Do not do what displeases God.” Actually our rule is “Do not do what pleases those we have identified as the worldy.” These are not equivalent rules.

I do not say that our fathers were wrong to draw a hard line. No doubt every new group is forced to draw firm lines to distinguish itself from that which it is not. Later on, when their identity is more secure, they can afford to become more discriminating. The same process occurs in the life of every child. During the “terrible two’s” the child is under a compulsion to say “no,” to do the opposite of what others are doing. He is discovering his selfhood, defining it as over-against others. Later on his self-assertions can become more discriminating. They can, that is, if he grows up.)

The tragedy is not so much that we have been prevented from enjoying many wholesome things by our misreading of what makes an act sinful. The tragedy is that our position again and again leads us into absurd stances, with the result that our young people are led into a cynical attitude toward all rules. And thereby many are being harmed for life. An even greater tragedy is that the action of this principle has the effect of obscuring serious sins which do not easily fall under its provisions, the sins of pride, of hypocrisy, of lovelessness.

For sin also arises within the holy community. Our youth do not need to be stimulated by the worldly to “make out” in a car along the roads of our communities. But we are, in general, quite tolerant of this. However, we consider dancing, even harmless folk games, to be very, very wicked. Yet there is much less erotic stimulation in dancing than there is in what goes on in those cars. Why then the extreme concern about dancing while we cover our eyes to the greater sins being committed? The reason should be clear. Dancing is associated with the “worldly” people and the “worldly” places. Indiscriminate “making out” can take place without coming into any sort of contact with those outside the church. Therefore, under our principle, it just is not as “bad,” even though it may be worse.

Teaching Discrimination Is Necessary

The principle we have been discussing assumes that it is possible to draw a line around the holy community that can shut out the world. This was literally almost possible in the early days. Our communities were often almost wholly Mennonite Brethren. A geographical line could be drawn around the saints. Inside were God’s people. Outside were Satan’s friends. Of course this is a perversion of the Gospel; and, of course, this could not last.

But this principle could be broadened to draw a different kind of line, one that excludes specific activities. Some activities are outside that line. If they were not defined as outside the bounds, then the assumption was that they could be wholly accepted within the line. Once radio was accepted in principle, I am not aware that any serious attempts were made by the church to govern its use. After all, if something is not defined as black, then this rule has no provisions for insisting that it is at least gray.

And this is one reason why I doubt that we can claim to have done ethical thinking. For sin does not always come neatly packaged in black and white. There just simply are many activities that have good and bad mixed together. It takes a trained conscience to know when the good outweighs the bad.

Let me use television again as an example. I am one who is quite disturbed about our indiscriminate viewing. Of course, there are good programs. And there are exceedingly bad ones. But what about the vast number of programs that do not fall under our usual criteria of badness? What distresses me are not the programs which show drinking and debauchery. Most dangerous, I believe, is the cumulative effect of the mediocrity of the vast bulk of the programming, even of the “good” programs. Is it possible to watch the mediocre day after day and not end by becoming mediocre ourselves? Is it Christian to be mediocre? Is not this an insult to our Creator? I believe seriously that television can be far
more degrading than the movies. And yet we stand helpless before it.

One of the most important words in the New Testament passages where good and evil is discussed is one that may be translated discriminate. But who is teaching us to discriminate between relative goods and evils? Our preaching is hindered by our inconsistent rules. How can pastors begin to teach discrimination in our TV viewing without admitting that the same principles should apply to the reading of books and to the seeing of movies and to the forms of all of our recreations? And how can they explain the radical nature of the freedom from rules which Paul claims for the Christian man? And how can they speak honestly to the young people without incurring the wrath of some of their elders? And so they tend more and more to avoid the subject altogether.

Of course, there must be rules for the young. They may even need to be quite stringent. When we are babies we are forbidden to touch stoves and cross streets. But there comes a time to learn how to touch stoves and cross streets. So also in morals. But until we are ready to become mature sons of God, we must be under the tutelage of the law as we are under the teaching of schoolmasters.

But we are not teaching our youth how to mature into the freedom of those who grow beyond the need for law. And that is also why I doubt that we have ethics. For this reason we, and they, are helpless when confronting new kinds of situations, situations to which the old rules do not automatically apply. But we go on clinging desperately to the old rules. Having lost our first love, many of us have no other way to define the newness of life we Christians are supposed to display. If some of us were to lose the sometimes artificial distinctions these rules provide, we would be indistinguishable from the world. And then we would know ourselves to be lost.

We must develop a new definition of separation, one that permits us to distinguish within an activity what is the good and the bad of it. For the world cannot be kept safely "out there." It is also "in here," in all "here's." This will complicate what we had hoped to keep simple, and it will require ethics.

The "Thou Shalts"

But what then is right? What shall we do? Since the normal events of everyday life were dictated by the old customs, our great-grandfathers did not need to change radically that form of their life. They knew, of course, that their life must be a positive expression of their new being. But what particularly new thing was required of them? It must have been quite obvious. It was required of them that they become witnesses of what had happened to them. They must preach the Gospel. Was it not, they reasoned, because the Mennonites promised not to evangelize in Russia that they had lost their Christian zeal?

In keeping with their overriding concentration on the salvation experience, they (and here also the revivalism of the American frontier offers an enlightening parallel) came to define discipleship to mean "going out and winning others." Many of them (but not all, by any means) interpreted Christian education to be training in witnessing. In short, the implication has been that obedience to Christ can be summed up in a Great Commandment: Be a soul winner.

And so, during my service in relief work in southeast Asia, I have seen impeccably orthodox and zealously evangelical missionaries use the black market, steal, and lie—and all with a clear conscience. For, after all, the black market exchange provides more funds wherewith to pay evangelists. Money and food sent for the hungry refugees can be diverted to support a Bible school. Lies can be used to undermine churchmen who do not represent purity of doctrine.

This is not true of the majority. But this kind of casuistry does follow quite naturally once one has unbiblically reduced the Christian life to the single commandment to "Bring them in."

The Mission of the Church

One cannot deny that evangelism is a commandment of God. Every sensitive Christian who reads the Great Commission will know that the church is being called to be a witness. The church is called to baptize and to teach. But the content of that teaching is not that the sinner is converted so that he can then center his life around converting others. Rather, the apostles were to teach "... them to observe whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20).

We are saved to glorify God by the keeping of all His commands to us. We do not have the arbitrary right to pick any one of them (like the command to witness) as more important than the others. We are not permitted to cheet for the sake of lost souls. If we are going to summarize the commandments, let us stick to that given us by Jesus, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God ... and thy neighbor as thyself." And this is consistent, for our love is measured by our willing obedience.

We must be deeply sensitive to God's will in all things, not just in the techniques of evangelism and in the more obvious "Thou Shalt Not." It is all too easy for us to obey all the explicit rules . . . and still be unable to discern right from wrong in a new situation. And we can be soul winners who are deeply unethical. "Yes," said a layman some months ago, "we have to admit that the . . . (naming another church) are more ethical than we are. They are more trustworthy. But at least one thing is noteworthy among us. Our ministers preach the Gospel." It is bad enough that we are not moral. But the devastating tragedy in those innocently spoken words is the blindness that permits us to feel that right preaching and believing can compensate for wrong living.

Decade of Enlargement

I fear that the current drive for "Enlargement" is becoming a justification for the continuance of this kind of thinking. In defining the Decade of Enlargement, one statement has been used which is a perfect example of the casuistry that results once one has ignored the whatsoever of Matthew 28:19-20. It reads: "It (Decade of Enlargement) is church evangelism in priority! It means placing evangelism in priority over all other functions and services of the church. Church growth is measured, pri-
arily, in terms of people won to Christ. All church activities measure themselves over against the basic mission of the church—adding to the body of Christ."

One would search the Scriptures in vain to establish any of these statements in this bold form. Ultimately, the command of God is to the *whatsoever*. Nor is the command to "build the church of God" fulfilled, even secondarily, by the sheer addition of numbers.

But it is the last sentence of the paragraph quoted above that gives the game away. Having decided that "adding to the body of Christ", is the basic proposition that must be accepted, we hold the key to solve all our church problems. What about church discipline? Would the revelation of some crooked business dealings bring shame upon us before the world? Bringing out the facts might then hinder our testimony. By this "measure" we are justified in forgetting all about the sin.

No, this "measure" will not do. It permits a rationalism which too easily delivers us from the need to be biblical, from the need to search the Scriptures, to pray, and to seek together to discover the will of God for our lives and for our church.

Is it not time that all of us begin to look again at what it means to be a disciple ... at what it means to do "... whatsoever I have commanded?" There is a great deal more to the Christian life than getting converted and witnessing to others. One of the greatest themes of the Bible is the commitment to personal and social justice which is required of the people of God.

### The Effect on Youth

Because we have neglected the Anabaptist emphasis on discipleship (Nachfolge), our shallow teachings on what we shall and shall not do, reinforced by the conditions surrounding the dramatic adult conversions experienced by our fathers, have ended by pushing our young people into unfortunate responses.

If, as we have learned from listening to testimonies, conversion implies that we stop doing certain sins (often explicitly described) and that we begin doing certain other actions, then is not an uncritical young person likely to doubt the genuineness of a conversion that does not follow this pattern? How can he be sure of his salvation unless he has committed, and then dramatically turned from, those sorts of sins? In short, there seems to be a logical necessity to commit those sins which we have defined as typifying the world. How else can a young person be sure that he has "come out from among them" unless he has, at least symbolically, joined "them"? Add to this the natural drive of a developing self to explore all its possibilities and an equally natural anger against the necessary and unnecessary restraints that are imposed on the young and we have all the elements needed for a sadly uncreative kind of rebellion.

### An Uncreative Rebellion

Notice the form that this rebellion has customarily taken. The young begin by imitating some of the actions of their older brothers (who imitated their uncles, etc., etc.) The actions chosen are precisely those which we have defined as those which characterize the "worldly." These are: smoking, drinking, movie-going (this is losing its symbolic power, except for the very protected), and the like. Currently fashionable is one or another aspect of beatnikism. These make up a supposedly rich dose of "worldliness" from which one can be reformed when settling back in the safe patterns of a normal Mennonite Brethren church.

One is struck, when watching the youth pursuing this well-worn detour in the Christian way, by the joylessness of their performance. It is almost as if they are fulfilling a duty, a duty that builds up a heavy charge of guilt which then is discharged in the "rededication" that follows. Indeed, so great is the subsequent relief from the following of this rut-detour that the effect is very like the conversion experience of our great-grandfathers. Perhaps it often is the same experience. (One hardly knows whether to be more concerned for the dismaying lack of imaginativeness in their sinning or for the sin itself.)

But one is further struck by the disappointing results. Too often the end-product is a satisfyingly staid "pillar" of the church who is deeply suspicious of anyone who wants to change any aspect of the status quo. Too often such a person seems to make no further attempt to the Christian grace, to grapple with the Scriptures, to deepen his Christian commitment. He remains satisfied with certain symbolic gestures which identify the in-group. He may even tithe.

Without thinking much about it, he is not too upset by the drinking-smoking-carousing of the current group of teen-agers. If his unformulated feelings could be put in words for him, he would have to admit that he considers it "normal." Of course, he is somewhat worried. For there are always some who fixate at one or another stage of their detour and become full-time drinkers, or gamblers, or rebels. But then must not every system pay the price of its deviants?

And yet there is increasing concern about the attitudes of our young people, and with good reason. It seems likely that the pattern I have just discussed is breaking down. For this pattern to be effective, it is necessary for the rebels to believe in the rules they are rebelling against. Otherwise breaking these rules would not serve to identify one with the ungodly. And unless one is unsuccessfully identified with sinners one can hardly "come out from among them."

### Final Effects

But something new and much more frightening may be happening. Some of our young people are rejecting the rules themselves. Indeed, there are those who, in principle, reject the very possibility of binding rules except insofar as they express the constantly changing expectations of a given community. This, in fact, may be the final effect of our rigidity, of our lack of ethical thinking.

The following paper, given me by a student in fulfillment of a church history assignment to "describe your church as if explaining it to an interested stranger," may serve to close this essay. It describes a nearly-lost segment of this generation. But most disturbing is the writer's tone. There seems to be little anxiety about the home community, though there is regret at the wastefulness of our system, at the damage to many lives. The dominant tone, however, is one of detachment, not of loyalty to the
church nor of commitment to what this group must surely consider to be moral absolutes. And one might well pause to reflect on the point that this was considered an appropriate description to be given to "... an interested stranger."

"The Mennonite Brethren member is supposed to be a witness to the rest of the world. He is to go out into the world steadfast and sure, converting his associates and setting an example for them. In reality, I think the majority of young people are failures. We may have progressed a long way from our meager beginning but we're on the decline now. Perhaps I'm prejudiced in mainly referring to my home church in...

We are slowly dying out. The congregation is mostly composed of the older German-speaking people. The young people flock to the cities. There's a set pattern for the high school graduates. The girls go to college for at least a year to catch a man if for no other purpose, while the (boys) with a career in mind go to college, and those without go to Denver. In either case, the girls end up in trouble and the boys end up with hangovers. I'm making a rash generalization for there are exceptions, but our church is rapidly deteriorating... I think our young people have been kept too caged up within a special environment. They are released to be eighteen years old, then released into a worldly society. With all the sudden freedom, they make a good attempt at drowning themselves. Some survive, some don't. They need to become acquainted with different social practices while they're growing up, not thrust into a strange society where they are asked to prove themselves. Remaining in the inner Mennonite circle, their faith is never questioned. Their religion grows stale and dies out of neglect and lack of practice. I believe it's a severe mistake for parents to protect their children from the world and its follies."

3. WHO LEADS US?

Shortly after a recent district conference, I was talking with some lay brethren about conference affairs. When several of the delegates joined our group, one of the older men turned to a delegate and asked, "Well, did you speak up at the conference or did you just keep quiet and vote "yes" to everything?"

I was struck by the tension which immediately came over the group and I was curious what the brethren were thinking, so I said something about "bureaucracy invading the Mennonite Brethren Church." The explosion of bitter comments which followed shocked me. They were upset not only by conference sessions which delegates feel they no longer control, but also by the general direction of the affairs of our brotherhood. They were so disturbed that there were tears in some eyes, and one brother was visibly trembling.

Whether justified or not, this frustration is widespread. The question of leadership has been raised several times in items in the Christian Leader. Many people feel that something is amiss. There is a great deal of "under the table" criticism.

But it is not so clear that this criticism is either true or helpful, and it can be dangerous. Often enough in the past, we lay people have rejected those who did in fact attempt to lead. Obviously, we will get nowhere by simply pointing accusing fingers at our leaders. They are, as a whole, sincere and dedicated men who are better trained than any generation of leaders we have ever had. Nevertheless, there is among us a great loss of confidence. The question has been raised, and it is imperative that we begin to discuss the issues.

A Loss of Mennonite Brethren Consensus

The loss of much of the original Mennonite Brethren consensus through sociological and religious change has increased the need for leadership while it has at the same time undermined the traditional forms through which such leadership could be exerted.

There was once a Mennonite Brethren consensus. Until twenty or thirty years ago we were all pretty much alike. We were either farmers or in business directly serving farmers. We knew what it meant to struggle against the land and the elements. We were all members of the same social class. We all shared a common background; we had a common world-view (Weltanschauung). We had the same kind of education. Basically, we thought alike.

But that homogeneity which provided the base for our consensus is rapidly evaporating. Most of us are not farmers. Some of us are poor and others are quite well-to-do. Many of us live in cities, and many more of us will soon be moving there. In education, in cultural achievements, in social standing, we differ greatly. We all know families in the church from whom an invitation to dinner is almost unthinkable. We do not share a common background or a common way of thinking. Worse yet, we do not ask a common set of questions. We do not even share common religious experiences, as has already been made evident.

This change in our circumstances has given a different meaning to our church structure. In the old days, a district or a general conference was, in reality, the entire church assembled. Out of many an over-the-fence discussion (or argument) the local church discovered its consensus. It chose delegates who could express this consensus. The people's will had become the delegate's will, and when all the delegates assembled, one could discern that many collective wills were being shaped into a fuller harmony. Democracy was real. The resolutions that were voted had grown out of and were then reaffirmed by all of us.

But, although our conference sessions have suffered little outward change, the meaning is now different. We have become too large and our ways of thinking are too diverse. We do not come to conference to see whether our local consensus is still in line with the thinking of others. We do not come to forge a united consensus in open debate and in many an informal discussion, standing around outside in constantly shifting groups. Now we come to ratify proposals from our various committees.

Committees are obviously valuable, indeed essential, if any forward-looking action is to be taken in the brief time of a conference. Different as we now are, it would require weeks to hammer out a consensus (staying together that long might be a good idea). Even in our local churches we do not depend anymore on a week of meetings to handle all the business of the year.
A committee can reflect the variety of our opinions so that consensus is achieved through the use of a few representative persons. It can be the group in miniature. But the product of such a committee, even if solemnly enacted on the conference floor, does not necessarily represent the consensus of us all. The decision of a committee (whether or not one man has manipulated that group) may seem as arbitrary to the man in the pew as the pronouncement of any “little pope.” Not long ago a layman complained to me that anyone who questioned the results of a committee in his church was treated with the shocked reproof we normally reserve for those who disbelieve what God Himself has spoken.

New Types of Leaders Are Emerging

Moreover, these changes have brought forth a new type of leader. Our conference was formed by like-thinking people who had shared a common experience. They did not need leaders to give them a sense of unity. This does not imply that there were no problems requiring leadership. Rather, they were all leaders insofar as they helped discuss, argue, pray, think. But some of them had greater ability to discern the emerging consensus and to express it in words. Preachers were chosen from among the brethren because they were respected for their competence in our common occupations and because they added to this the skill of being able to put into forceful language what most of us were already thinking. They were respected because they were competent farmers or teachers or businessmen. They were trusted because they shared our common thinking. They were chosen because they had the gift of putting it into words. It would be more accurate to call them spokesmen rather than leaders.

And so it was proper and natural for them to speak “with authority.” They were not really dictatorial when they laid down the law—or a conference resolution. (Probably I am idealistic here.) It was not arbitrary authoritarianism when they told us rather forcefully what we were going to do. It is more likely that they could affect this manner of leadership because they were expressing the rules and ideas that we willed upon ourselves. One can almost say that they were the loudspeakers who reproduced the ideas we were all whispering into our inner “mikes.” Of course, they often misunderstood the source of their authority and imagined that it came from their own special gifts or from some privileged position with God. Then they became flagrantly autocratic. However, when their thinking got too far away from the consensus, the brotherhood had ways of pulling them back (or chopping them off).

At present the key to leadership is professional training in the byways of theology where we can neither follow nor judge the result. Paradoxically, we seem to accord the minister less genuine respect than we did before. Since we cannot judge his expertise, we do not know where to place him. In spite of his special training, there will be others in the community with more education than he. There may even be a suspicion that in the old days he would not have had what it takes to become a leader at all. Finally, since he probably does not come from the area and cannot meet us on the common ground of occupation, we are unable to talk freely to him. We do not tell him that there are things about him that we do not like. (We wait till the end of his term and then vote him out.) As a result we feel a little guilty, and we react to him with suspicion.

Which Wine—and Which Bottles?

How then is the minister to lead? Many of the old answers do not apply. What are the new answers? By what forms shall we contain them? “Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish.” (Matt. 9:17).

Old Wine and Old Bottles?

Some ministers try to cling to the old wine and the old bottles. To do this is to choose to repeat the past answers in the old ways in an almost ritualistic attempt to ignore the present complexity. Their answers will be irrelevant, and their stance will be inappropriate and even embarrassing. In expressing the consensus of the past, they will appear to be unthinking authoritarians. They will appeal only to the ritualists, to those who continue to think in the past.

Not long ago I heard a minister preach a sermon on the evils of compromise. He was vigorous in his condemnation of the easy adjustments we make to what he assumed to be evil. It was clear that he was pleasing much of the congregation. Heads nodded in worried agreement. “We must turn back... we must return.” And so the sermon ended. But turn back to what? He could not say. Each hearer was left to fill in his own answer. This kind of preaching is dangerous. It is the product of fear and confusion, and it increases fear and confusion in the congregation. Even the preacher’s cry for us to “find ourselves” serves finally to increase the lostness we hoped to escape.

Or, preachers may stress only those parts of the former consensus which can still be seen to be relevant. This kind of preaching is admittedly popular although it does not help answer our present problems. A friend recently reported such a sermon which had been preached in his home church. The visiting minister had been eloquent in his plea for all to become “witnesses.” We can still all agree to that, surely. It was a real, old-fashioned exhortation. My friend thought it rather perverse. Here were a group of people who do not witness. Yet they were not disturbed or convicted. They did not intend to go out and begin witnessing. Yet, with every indication of complete satisfaction, they told each other how “blessed” they had been. It had been a real comfort to them to hear this sermon. Here had been the old-time assurance. Here was an expression of a consensus to which they all gave lip-service. They could all agree about something. In the midst of confusion and change it is so comforting to be able to agree on an idea that going out and living by it is almost beside the point.

New Wine and Old Bottles?

Some ministers may prefer to pour new wine into old bottles. We can see that times have changed. We know that new specifics must be given. And so we use the old forms to contain the new answers.
To these men it seems clear that the modes of leadership must continue as in the past. Like their predecessors, they must "have the answers" and deliver them in tones of stern assurance. It is no doubt true that they are often right. But even if they are indubitably correct, their pronouncements are not accepted in the same spirit as was the case in the past. The "loud-speaker" approach does not, under present circumstances, have the same meaning at all. The leader of the past spoke a consensus that was hammered out by all the brethren. We were not the kind of people who were willing to have a "little pope" hand down the truth to us as from the sky—not even if it really was the truth. We were a brotherhood; we acted on a tacit belief that God would speak to us from within as we thought and prayed and struggled to discern the implications of our experience and to divide the Scriptures. Nor was it the professional concern of the leader to discover this truth alone. It was the responsibility of all. And when it had been hammered out, we enjoyed to hear it spoken with authority—the authority of all of us speaking together. But to use the old forms today is actually to reject the old meaning.

Sometimes leaders know that they do not have many answers. And yet, bound by their understanding of the role of a leader, they feel the necessity of assuming a firm position. These are truly tragic figures. They are themselves unsure of answers which they preach with great conviction. They bear doubts in themselves to save us from hard questions. Having sacrificed their integrity, they also are finally rejected and are forced to bear the double fate of martyrs who cannot even respect themselves.

New Wine and New Bottles

In frustration with both the old answers and the old forms, many of us are strongly tempted to borrow both answers and forms from other groups, to pour new wine into new bottles. To attempt this is to be false to both our heritage and to our genius. We can and must learn from all who name the name of Christ, but we dare not sell our God-given heritage for a mess of what passes for current "evangelical" jargon. If it is God who has led in our history, then we are blasphemers if we try to wash away its memory. It is frightening that we can steep ourselves in Hodge and Machen and Chafer and Henry and never think to read Menno Simons—or bother to translate P. M. Friesen and A. H. Unruh.

Rather than face these complexities openly we cast about for some panacea, some program or gimmick that will help us find our lost consensus. We admire the traveling big shot who preaches his sermon or his series with conviction. But then he departs, without having had to address himself responsibly to our specific problems. (For the same reasons, we became addicted to the puerile, over-simplified certainties as given us in most so-called "Christian" fiction.)

And so in our fear we are easy prey to the "smooth" outsider who pretends to have seen through the modern complexity and who proclaims that it is really the old simplicity disguised. He dresses the old simplicity in the clothes of the new complexity, comforting the faith-

ful by deceiving them into the belief that when the outer form of the new can be utilized in the service of the old that the new has been mastered, that its sting has been pulled. And so he feeds us dubious apologies, phony scienticism, half-baked psychologism, and filtered philosophical pap. He comforts us that all these things are really proofs of the old simplicities. Because our ears are tickled we put aside our suspicions. And he uses such big words that we assume he must know what he is talking about. (It is interesting that such men are often free-lancers, who have not had to address themselves responsibly to the need of a church and a denomination. Although they are often anti-denominational, they probably make a good living sponging off denominations.)

Packaging the Product

Because ministers do not understand their roles; because the official answers do not always apply; because we have set up the wrong ideals to imitate; because we have lost our consensus; because we are not sure how our brother thinks—we are afraid of each other, afraid to share even the truths we know. At a time when we need leadership as never before, we have made leadership almost impossible.

And so the pastor or teacher who knows that things are not so simple is silenced. Whether through cowardice or through the decision to retreat and live to fight another day, he does not say what he knows. I received a lesson in this at one of the conferences where the baptism issue was being discussed. Much was being made of the practice of the early church. Finally I went to one of the leaders and said quietly to him that these references were inaccurate. "I know," said he, "why don't you tell them—you are young—you have less to lose." On his face was pathos, shame, cowardice.

But before we blame the preachers, we had better look at our condition from still another perspective. It may be the case that it is we laymen who are making real leadership almost impossible. In the two preceding essays I spoke of the consequences of the shift from living in an experience to concern about that experience. On a larger scale, a similar shift happens to the entire group.

The Beginning of the Bureaucratic Trend

Every outpouring of the spirit leads to the creation of forms, of institutions, to channel and to perpetuate the life that came in the experience. The institutions are seen as a means, a necessary by-product. They, like the teachings (the dogmatic and the subjective), are both necessary and secondary.

But gradually the institution asserts its own prerogatives. Instead of remaining a tool, it more and more becomes the master. The institution, which was created and mastered by the first generations, ends by making servants of those who follow. Those to whom the mantle is given become "officials," "professionals." Instead of priests and prophets, they tend to become "organization men" and "administrators." (See The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry by Niebuhr and Williams.)

The silent rules that govern all bureaucracies take
over. For the sake of efficiency, processes become streamlined and impersonal. Hierarchies of power are defined. "Success" is not measured by greatness of spirit, it is defined by the extent one climbs the steps of hierarchy.

"Don't accept the call from that church," I once heard one of our lay leaders warn a young seminarian, "it is in a declining community, and you will be considered a minister who loses members and will never get a decent church." Evidently success is not to be measured by how well a pastor helps prepare the young of a "declining community" to take their place in some distant city or the old to accept triumphantly retirement and death.

Although we are in the midst of this bureaucratic process, we have not yet (thank God) attained the heights of efficiency reached by the Vatican or the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board. There we can see how an institution becomes autonomous and self-perpetuating. There we can see how, more and more, the institution evolves by attempting to force consensus from the top. There we can see the end result of the bureaucratic trend. (Fortunately there is a growing emphasis on the vitality in many of the older churches and a growing interest in encouraging initiative at the local level.)

Emphasis on the Package

It is fascinating how tenaciously a group can cling to its forms and institutions. The original spirit can evaporate all unnoticed. With that gone, we cling ever more firmly to the shell that housed it. We let the kernel go because we concentrate upon the husk. Then we cling to the husk lest, that gone, we should see that we hold nothing.

One of the great revolutions of our time is the revolution in packaging. We sell the same old contents by wrapping them in vivid orange and red. It is the package that counts. Does the Sunday school have five departments (at least) and two teachers for every class? Is there a mens organization and a ladies organization and a youth organization? Are budgets met? Is the building new and shiny? Are there more members at the end of the year than at the beginning? These may all be good things. They may be evidence of inner life. Or they may be the measure of our diligence at sprucing up the package while the contents mold away.

And so we laymen, who have identified ourselves with the Mennonite Brethren institution, are anxious to put on a good appearance before the world. We want to present a shiny package. We are concerned about our "image" (to use an almost-sacred modern word). We cut our ministers to fit our needs. We want someone who will represent our ambitions, someone who will be respected as a "good Joe" by the rest of the community.

We want someone who will be an expert at sprucing up our package. And may heaven help him if his suit is shabby or if he cannot "wow" a Chamber of Commerce banquet with funny stories.

Most important of all, we hire him to reassure us that our husks are all-important. He had better be "orthodox" in every way—and use the King James version. Since we have almost lost the capacity for personal trust in God, we need him to assure us that beliefs in propositions are our guarantee. Because we have ignored discipleship and ethics, we want him to tell us of the glories of our long-ago "conversion." And we want him to win an occasional outsider so that, by proxy, we can be reassured that our teachings have yet the mark of truth and power upon them (but not too often; the complexion of our group might change). Above all, he must not meddle with reality. Our business dealings and home life are none of his affair.

Well, we have not yet entirely come to this. Perhaps we never will. But who can deny that this trend is upon us? Would we recognize an Amos or a John the Baptist if he were to come upon us? Or would our piles of stones be ready?

4. WHAT IS OUR AUTHORITY?

Recently I went to the local old people's home and discussed the "good old days" with a dozen or more of the older people. One of the ladies related how the adults used to "sit together in the long winter evenings and discuss the Bible. We young ones listened eagerly. It was so interesting."

Any listing of Mennonite Brethren distinctive will include our biblicism. Throughout the history of our church, we have professed that the Scriptures, and the Scriptures alone, are the authoritative source of our thought and action. We have always claimed that once some point was clearly proved to be scriptural, that point was automatically accepted and was expected to govern our actions. Nor did our fathers merely give lip-service to the primacy of the Bible. As the elderly lady pointed out, our early leaders approached all problems of the brotherhood while sitting around a table on which lay an open Bible.

I believe that Bible study was "so interesting" because this was the place where the problems of our brotherhood were hammered out. Our fathers brought real problems to the meeting, problems that affected the whole community and in the solving of which each one contributed his own thinking and his best insight. Had anyone asked these brethren by what authority they thought and acted, they would have been quick to point to that open Bible before them.

Have we become less Bible-centered than our forbears? Many of our lay people and ministers believe that this is the case. They know that we have given up practices (long hair for women, covering the head in church, no jewelry, no Sunday sports, church discipline, etc.) that our fathers claimed were firmly scriptural. Even on more central doctrinal points many of our people complain that we are becoming unbiblically lax. There is also evidence that our young people know less about the Bible than did the previous generation.

It seems to me that there is much truth in these criticisms. A shift very similar to that which we discovered in the change from living in an experience to thinking about that experience has taken place in our use of the Scriptures. The result is that, although we have always intended to remain biblicists, we actually have come to
view the Bible in a different way than did our fathers. With the Scriptures before them, they addressed themselves to their problems. For us, the Scriptures themselves constitute one of the most difficult of our problems.

Our Fathers Used the Scriptures; We Defend Them

Our fathers could handle the Scriptures roughly; they had no fear that the Bible would break in their hands. And so they could disagree, and argue, and remain in uncertainty about some passage. But we have become too frightened to imitate their freedom. The modern methods of biblical criticism have especially frightened us. Formerly, when few people doubted the authenticity of Scriptures, it hardly occurred to us that the Bible needed defense. Higher criticism has shaken that confidence so that now we have actually become convinced that we must put protective wrappings around the Bible and label it "Handle with Care." (There is something ironic and pathetic about Christians desperately using tooth and claw to protect their sword.) Moreover, those who are afraid that further insight into the Scriptures will, in leading us to different conclusions, cause us to doubt our competence in interpretation and the very possibility of finding final answers.

And so it is that we have changed from a people who simply used the Scriptures to people who are highly sensitive to any approach to the Bible that seems to threaten our high regard for it. We are almost afraid to bring our real problems to it lest, not finding an immediate solution, we should come to have doubts about the adequacy of the Scriptures to provide answers.

For this reason, we are more concerned that our young people believe in the Bible than that they understand it. One father was quite anxious to let me know that he disapproved of the use of modern translations. Nor did he like the way preachers have of referring to the "original Greek." He was convinced that these things would cause his children to ask questions about the Bible and would shake their faith.

And so it is that our ordination boards worry more about whether a minister has the "correct" interpretation of the inspiration of Scripture than that he demonstrate skill in dividing it rightly. In fact, the doctrine of inspiration (with rigid definitions as to what "inspiration" means) is more and more becoming the test for fundamentalist orthodoxy. "Bible believing" has come to be a favorite designation for churches and churchmen who seem to have no great concern that, among themselves, they disagree greatly about what the Bible actually says. The important thing for them is that they all look at the Bible in the same way. To be a "Bible" church somehow seems to many to be a sufficient guarantee of truth and righteousness.

We often see articles in our conference periodicals which plead a "return to the Scriptures." But the writers seem as concerned that we venerate them as that we use them. We seldom see an article which simply takes a text and expounds its meaning.

The Bible Is Not Our Sole Authority

Ironically, our very concern about the Scriptures has permitted us to neglect its use.

Let us take a recent example. Until five years ago, our leaders had insisted that the question of the mode of baptism could only be solved on (rather narrowly defined) biblical considerations. (See the minutes of the 1957 Yarrow General Conference.) When this question was raised in 1961 we were told that we could solve the issue without reference to the biblical material. We were told that the issue could be decided on the basis of fellowship. Throughout the entire discussion since that time, I recall only one attempt to discuss the biblical implications—one unsatisfactory, overly-cautious article in the Christian Leader. The crucial question then arises: upon what basis are we to decide when a question is to be decided with or without reference to the Bible? We claim to rest upon biblical authority. But biblicalism flies out the window when we arrogate to ourselves the right to decide when an issue is to be decided on the basis of Scripture and when it is not. To be consistent, we must at least have biblical warrant for deciding when we do or do not need to settle an issue with reference to Scripture.

I assume that some of our leaders were convinced that our action on baptism was in accord with the fuller New Testament teachings on this ordinance. If not, we certainly must doubt their right to lead. But they were hesitant to admit this to the rest of us because it would force us to admit that our fathers did not discover the entire biblical teaching on this subject; and so our confidence in our fathers (or in the Scriptures) might be shaken. But our subsequent actions have neither solved the problem nor reassured the faithful.

Another example of our attitude can be seen in our frequent misuse of the "proof-text" method. Somewhat we feel that a long list of Bible referencess behind a statement guarantees the correctness of the statement. Yet, when one looks up those references, one often finds that some are not relevant to the discussion at all. Others have been wrenched out of their context in dubious fashion. Earnest "biblicists" can and have "proved" almost every religous proposition imagined by man by the use of this technique. We are all too often so awed by the trappings of biblicalism that we are unable to judge whether the substance is also there.

Our fathers claimed to be biblicalists. So do we. But I have demonstrated that we do not have the same attitude to the Scriptures. In fact, it has become clear that Scripture is not our sole authority. Even the way in which we look at the Bible has been governed by the external conditions which drive us to (or away from) the Scriptures.

But before we judge ourselves too harshly for having "fallen away," let us admit that our fathers also did not derive their teachings and actions from the sole authority of Scripture. It is true that the Scriptures dominated their lives to an amazing degree; yet their consensus was only partly derived from the teachings of the Bible.

Many of the specific rules and doctrines which our fathers "derived" from Scriptures were in fact "found" there because the fathers were predisposed by prior training and thinking to look for those very things. They read the Bible through a special set of lenses—that vision that was made possible by their life and experience.
For instance, I recently read *Gulliver's Travels*. I read it for the adventure and for relaxation. But the author intended much more than that. Beneath the humorous surface, the book is actually slaming social satire, written by a man so bitter that he finally went insane. But, except on a shallow level, I do not have the kind of experience which permits me to see all that the author intended. I simply do not know enough of eighteenth century England to read the book with full understanding.

Had Scripture been our sole authority, then presumably our consensus would have remained. Now that our way of living has changed, now that we have undergone the shifts of focus that happen to all second, third, and fourth generations, we no longer see through the same sorts of lenses. And so we are predisposed to look at the Bible in different ways and to find different sorts of things.

But this frightens us. Our attitudes may change without our noticing it. We may even be willing to change our practices. But we are entirely unwilling to admit that a principle so basic as this may have been misconceived. And so we go proclaiming the principle while our actions more and more prove us to be wrong.

Ultimately, for our fathers, their authority was at least threefold: the Scripture, their group effort to discover its meaning under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and their similar experiences with God and with each other to serve as the key for the unlocking of Scriptures. To demonstrate this last point, I need only refer to the essays on conversion, ethics, and leadership. The kind of experiences our fathers had prepared them to understand that which confirmed and clarified that experience. The nature of their adult conversions has shaped our subsequent understanding and has limited our capacity to enter into the fuller understanding offered in the Bible.

**The Baptism Question**

We may return to the question of baptism to illustrate this point. As was pointed out, baptism is held to signify the adult decision to stop following one path and to join another. The mode of baptism by immersion illustrates this as a dying and rising with Christ. Now this fits well the adult experience of our fathers. And so they found Scripture passages to confirm this teaching.

But they did not discover the full biblical meaning of baptism. A few questions will quickly show that we have not yet understood what the early church meant by baptism:

1. What is the connection of water baptism with the baptism of the Holy Spirit? The two are closely related in the New Testament; their separation is considered abnormal. See Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:10; Acts 2:38, 8:14-17, 10:44-47, 19:1-7.

2. What about infant baptism? In the story of Jesus blessing the children (Mark 10:13-16) is a phrase that was part of the earliest baptismal liturgy (and already reflected in the book of Acts). The early church treated this passage in connection with baptism. Even Tertullian (c. 150-225) admitted this, though he favored baptism only for those already married. The great church scholar Origen (c. 182-251) claimed that infant baptism was begun by the apostles.

3. What about the belief of the early church that baptism washed away sins and is essential for salvation? By the time of Hermas (c. 115-140) and Justin (died 153) this was generally accepted. See John 3:5; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21.

4. What about the practice of baptism for the dead as mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:29?

I do not know the answer to these questions. I have neither accepted child baptism nor baptism for the dead, but these problems demonstrate my contention that our fathers (and we) have been able to "see and hear" only that for which our eyes and ears—and experience—have prepared us. I believe that anyone who studies church history with an open mind will see that this has always been true.

We should have the courage to draw the necessary conclusions. The Protestant principle that the Bible is the sole authority for the Christian (sola Scriptura) is itself the product of one kind of special experience. This principle is unworkable in practice; and it is wrong in theory.

Each Protestant group, drawing on its own experiences, tends to derive specific dogmatic systems from the Bible which justify and explain its own more or less limited experiences. Once this system has been made normative, authority is once more restored to tradition, that is, to the authorities who have developed and maintained that system.

The other alternative is to allow each man to interpret the Bible for himself. In this case, each man becomes an authority unto himself. As the interpreter, he, not the Bible, becomes the authority. Of course, he can always claim that it is the Holy Spirit that has led him into "his" truth.

Nevertheless, our fathers were more right than they understood. Though they read the Scriptures through the level of insight that their experiences had given them, their method of Bible study mitigated the effect of personal idiosyncrasies. Bible study often took place in groups. Thus one person could compare his insights with those of others in the group. But this group study has implications even more important. Recent studies into the Anabaptist uses of Scripture have demonstrated that our earliest forefathers understood that in group study around a table in the home, or wherever it took place, something happened that went beyond the purely natural. Where "two or three" were gathered together, there, in special power, was the Holy Spirit who guided their common efforts into fuller insight than would be the case for individual study alone. (See the 1964 April and July issues of *Mennonite Life* for a series of articles on the Anabaptist use of Scriptures.)

Any one source of authority can lead us astray. Tradition as sole authority thwarts new growth and promotes sterile orthodoxy. The inner voice of the Spirit does not provide adequate criteria for distinguishing between the spirits, and undisciplined fancies and fragmentation occur. Biblicalism alone does not protect us from traditionalism or from an arrogant individualism that is one of the diseases of our age.
I believe that God has given us all these sources of authority. If God has acted in the church through the ages, then the history and traditions of the church help us to see the pattern of His action and guide us in our study of the Bible. But the church can also lose its way, and we require the Scriptures to judge even the church which transmits them to us. And undergirding all is the Holy Spirit, bringing life to the church and grace to our own hearts. I believe that God, in His wisdom, has given us the Scriptures; He is acting among us through His Holy Spirit; He is fulfilling His aim in history through the reality of the Church, the body of Christ.

How could we know who this God is and what He has done if He had not provided an account of His central work and of the results on those who saw it? How could we trust this account unless there were an unbroken chain of witnesses to the continuing reality of that event to which it testifies? And how could we become present actors in the drama of that event except through the living power of the Holy Spirit?

PART TWO

Old Wine Is Better

1. WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THE OLD WINE-SKINS?

It has been my supposition throughout these essays that our forefathers had what was, for the most part, a genuine and fresh experience with God. In order to teach and preach what they had received, they set up systems of explanations, rules, and institutions. In time, the systems tended to become central. And so these "forms," which for the fathers were walls of defense and channels of power, have tended to become, for us, walls of imprisonment and fixed rituals.

What, then, shall we do with these forms?

One answer is to learn to live with them, to pretend that these formulas are adequate substitutes for the new wine that intoxicated our fathers. No doubt many of us, failing to escape our forms because even the revolt against them has been institutionalized, have been content to settle down in packaged conformity.

Another answer is to attempt to turn the clock back. Some of us would like to recapture the old meanings by returning entirely to the former "simplicities." Hardly any of us have the courage to attempt this, however. The Glatterites and the Amish have demonstrated the irrelevance and futility of such an answer.

It is more tempting to return to the fathers by doing what they did—seceding to start a new and "purer" group. One occasionally hears comments that it may be time to think of our Mennonite Brethren Church as our great-grandfathers thought of the other Mennonites in Russia.

No doubt there are times when the forms so choke out life that they must be completely broken, but this can hardly be the better answer. Our Christian faith would be almost meaningless if it could only set up an endlessly repeated cycle from birth to death to birth again. To be forced to begin over in the same way is to admit that nothing has been learned. If the cycle is inevitable, why should those at the beginning of the circle be considered any better than their "degenerate" grandsons at the end? When each end of the cycle produces the other end, it is nonsense to say that the beginning saints are wiser than the ending sinners.

Another possibility is to escape our problems by transferring to another group. Some, thirsty for a headier draught, seek the old spirit by joining groups still young enough to be enthusiastic. It was no accident that hundreds of our people joined the Adventists early in this century. Nor is the present leakage to Pentecostal groups at all surprising. Some move in the other direction, joining groups who have advanced much farther down the road that we are traveling.

The rest of us, rejecting these answers, huddle over our embers, warming ourselves from the coals that do continue to glow, praying for a revival that will cause the fire to flare more brightly. We stir up the ashes of our old forms, hoping that the volcano will erupt again where now are beds of lava. Others try to borrow the forms and, they hope, the fire from other groups. These are assured that if we "do" what Group X did, we will have the experience that Group X is presumed to have had.

The Forms Are Secondary

It seems to me that we must begin by admitting that no forms, no wineskins, can contain forever the rich wine of the Holy Spirit. All our wineskins will finally burst—or spoil the wine. No set of doctrinal statements can comprehend God. No set rules can formalize the law of love. No institution can unleash the Holy Spirit by opening up its faucets.

An experience is an event, and no event can be fully analyzed, though historians fill the world with books about it. Our fathers knew an event (and so, of course, have many of us). They then worked out the subjective conditions of that event. But, though necessary, these sets of descriptions can never say what an event says to those who lived it.

A kiss can also be analyzed. The subjective factors can be described as exquisitely as subtle introspections will permit. The objective factors can, in principle, be outlined with such accuracy that no sodium ion in any neural center would be left uncharted and no chemical change in any gland would pass unnoticed. But a person who has never been in love cannot claim that learning all this mass of data will teach him what
it means to kiss. And one who knows will smile in scorn or pity at one who claims it does.

But They Are Necessary

Shall we then cast out the forms and deny the long descriptions? Of course not. The forms are secondary to the event, but the event cannot come unless there are the forms.

This is something that we Anabaptists and Pietists have difficulty learning. In rebellion against the choking mass of forms, the extremists of the Reformation thought to undercut them all by making Christianity a “heart” religion, beyond the need of “churchly” trappings. But even the heart must know its reasons and express itself in outward “trappings.”

Even love requires forms. Love is not the kiss, not the flowers, not the walk across a moonlit field. Neither can it be expressed without such tokens. The meaning of a marriage of true minds is not in the rituals of the home, nor can this meaning be without such rituals.

And so it is with God. We cannot talk with Him directly, face to face. We are natural; He is supernatural. We cannot hear the voice of God, just as stones cannot hear a symphony. Therefore, He must come to our level and deal with us by indirectness. He must enter into forms, “speaking” through smoking mountains and visions and culture forms like words and institutions.

Thus it is that every revelation of God can be described in natural terms. One can never “prove” that God has spoken to one who has not “ears to hear,” just as one can never explain love to one who thinks all moonlight madness to be glands and nerves.

Forms as Sacraments

If God is beyond all natural forms, and we can hear only natural things, how then can He speak at all? He uses natural things to bring the heavenly. He uses words, though words, like wagons with a two-ton limit, can never carry the weight of meaning that He brings. He uses nature to say more than nature means. Finally, supremely, the Formless takes on form itself, becoming flesh and blood. Do you mean that this man is God? No, not God as He is in Himself. That would be absurd. Yes, this man is God insofar as He can reveal Himself (veiling Himself in His unveiling) to man for our salvation.

In those events that are God’s revealing acts, we see more than there is there to see. That is the meaning of sacrament. God takes what is natural, human, of this earth, to lead us far beyond this sphere. By His power the word that we can hear and the person whom we can see carry grace and meaning beyond their power to convey. And so, to talk of it, we are forced to use analogies, parables, poetry. To express the power of God to use the natural to transmit the heavenly, we must move beyond words.

That is one reason why we are given the sacrament of the Eucharist. What is more natural than bread that remains bread and wine that remains wine? Yet, because He has so decreed, this ordinance can, by the power of the Spirit, transmit more than bread can carry, mean more than wine can ever be. Also these (especially these, since Christ so wills) can be the carriers of grace. Truly the Lord’s Supper is a very parable of the whole nature of God’s acting in this world. By and through the commemoration of the death of Christ, it becomes itself, by the present grace of His Spirit, a part of His continuing event.

We Need Forms to Transcend Forms

Then what of forms and rituals? We cannot do away with them. The assumption that we can do so in some new “revival” is profoundly wrong. Indeed, it would seem that we need more of them.

We need more of them because we have lost one sort of consensus. Our fathers could group together because they all were like each other. Because of this they could derive the same meaning from the same kind of experience. But we are not alike anymore. To receive the same experience with God, we require somewhat different forms. Only in a world of carbon copies would all families have precisely the same rituals. Only in a world of robots would the same conversion experience take exactly the same forms.

Though essential, forms tend to displace their meaning. Meaningful rituals become routines. That is another reason why we need a manifold of forms, a variety of rituals. That through which grace once flowed may become barren; while another channel, which was once strange and incomprehensible, suddenly opens the life-giving streams.

Finally, we need a multitude of systems to teach us that systems are only systems, that none of our sets of descriptions or institutions are absolute. Contradictory theologies (for example, Arminianism versus Calvinism) are no embarrassment to us. All of them help us to see and to understand. No one of them can be “the Truth,” although all are necessary. They are like photographs of a city. No one of them can reveal very much. Each of them gives us a glimpse from yet another angle. Even all of them together cannot help us to translate two-dimensional representations into the three-dimensional reality of the city.

Biting and intoxicating as was the new wine drunk by our fathers, God intends something better for us—for “the old wine is the best.” The mellow wine can only be made with wine that was once new and fresh. We must begin also with the truth our fathers found and with the forms that they have taught us. But we have learned of other vintages. And God has allowed our own to age. Thanks to our fathers, our possibilities are greater. We begin where they began, but we can go beyond the place where they left off. We honor them by doing so. By that we imitate “the spirit of their faith” (Hebrews 13:7). We do not so much need renewal (though some may need to start there) as we need to mature, to “… leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instructions about ablations, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this will we do if God permits” (Hebrews 6: 1-3).
And Yet We Must Outgrow Them

I believe that God is permitting us to lose our original consensus, that He is allowing our sets of descriptions to prove inadequate. I believe that He does this to help nudge us into the greater maturity promised to the sons of God. He does not want us to reject the past; that would be to reject the reality of His working. But we are still babes in Christ. Like the Hebrews we need prophetic help. Like the early church we need Paul and Apollos to help us find the mature freedom of our sonship.

We have good progress for this constant growth in sonship. The children of Israel also had, at Sinai, a good experience. But their interpretations of the meaning of that experience had to be altered many times. To accomplish this deepening, God sent prosperity—and destruction. And He sent the prophets, who had to wrestle over and over again with the meaning of their past in the light of the crises of the present until this people could provide the birthplace of the Messiah.

So also the church began with a great event and a great experience. Its history is a making explicit of the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—and of its Pentecost participation in that event. Indeed, those events require prior history as well as subsequent history. For they were based on, and reveal the meaning of, the events that began at Sinai, and before that, in Ur of the Chaldees, and before that at the beginning of the creation itself.

Surely God can begin with us at whatever level we are. But to enter more deeply into the meaning of our experience, we must understand more and more. This is why Christians must learn to know each other. We must deepen and correct our experiences by comparing ourselves with and entering into the experiences of other Christians—all other Christians. Christ wills that His body be one. He who stands in the way of that oneness stands in the way of the will of Christ.

There are those who fear that this unification will destroy some of the forms, some of the expressions, through which men have met God. This is a legitimate fear. When it is gathered together, the body of Christ must be present in all its parts, for each has its function. Each contributes to that whole before which even the principalities and powers must bow and through which the whole meaning of the event of Christ can become manifest and by which we shall be able to read the Scriptures with fuller understanding.

But we will only grow beyond our grandfathers by rediscovering the reality of the experience that came to them. Like them we need to meet God. Like them we need to be open about our experiences and our feelings, being willing once again to sit around tables, struggling in all honesty to study the Scriptures in the light of our experiences and those of many other sorts of Christians, into whose experiences we must be willing to enter. We must be willing to bring our hard questions, our unsolved problems, to the Scriptures and to each other, trusting that the Holy Spirit will lead us into new and deeper experience with Him who is the way, the truth, the life. Then we will grow from glory to glory—and from form to form—until, beyond the need for present forms, we meet the One toward whom they ever point.

2. BEYOND BIBLIOLATRY

We have already showed that our fathers interpreted the Scripture in the light of their experience and that they checked this interpretation with those who shared their experience. They were right so to do. We need not think, however, that we are slighting them if we admit that the character of their experience was governed in large part by the circumstances that had shaped their character and their need. As we have seen, our children have been shaped by a different set of circumstances and their experiences require different forms if they are to be expressed adequately. Their experience also must be taken into account when we search the Scriptures.

In fact, every form through which men have in every age experienced the saving grace of God is another clue which helps us to interpret the meaning of the event of Jesus Christ, who made these experiences possible. Is this not part, at least, of the reason why the church has always insisted that it is the guardian of the interpretation of Scriptures? Is not our Anabaptist insistence on group Bible study a recognition of this? For where two or three are gathered together, there Christ is in the midst of them. And where Christ is, there is the Church.

However simple they may be, these two or three can then experience the reality of being the Church of God. But they will eventually need also the doctors of the church to help them avoid the heresies and the one-sidedness into which a person with limited experience can so easily fall. And the full experience of the church is needed so that what truly is heresy can be recognized.

Toward a Deeper Interpretation of the Scriptures

Our great-grandfathers forged a level of biblical interpretation answering to their condition. As their successors we are taking our conference out of the child-level into a kind of adolescence. We are developing new forms for our experience. We will not need to reject wholly the biblical interpretations handed on to us, but we must broaden and deepen them so that they can account for our present experience as well as judge our experience where it is in error. If we have the courage to do this, we will be true sons of our fathers. For we will be doing for our own time and experience what our fathers did for their time and their experience.

We must begin where we are. As our forefathers were limited in their capacity to understand, so we also are limited. We read the Scriptures through the eyes and minds of modern Westerners. We imagine that we know how to think and that we can go to the Bible to discover what to think. We phrase the questions and go to the Bible for answers. But the way we think and the questions we ask are determined by our culture, our experiences, and our capacities.

And so we are not ready to enter more deeply into the Scriptures. To do that we will have to enter more deeply into the life and experiences of all others who have named the name of Christ. To do that we will have to learn to enter again into the world of the ancients,
learning to ask the questions that the Hebrews and the early Christians were asking. Only then will we more fully understand the answers they received. (We are not aware that even thought categories as fundamental as time and space were basically different for the ancients than they are for us.)

Our problems with evolution and Genesis are good examples of the trouble we get into because we read the Bible asking our modern scientific questions rather than the ones that the ancients were asking. Unbelievers simply write off the creation accounts as stupid, asking how one could speak of mornings and evenings before the sun and stars had been created. Believers reach exegetical heights trying to justify some kind of literal application of these expressions. And yet it is doubtful that, to an ancient Hebrew, these would signify time periods at all. Several scholars have shown that what is being discussed is the relationship of the Creator to the created, of the constant interplay and tension between chaos and form. This was not science, but theology—true, subtle and profound that it is difficult to deny that God was guiding the thought of the writer.

But we miss this because we are bound by our modern thought categories. For us something is either a fact or it is a fiction. And so we cannot understand the sophisticated ways the ancient Hebrews had of employing mythic material to express theological truth without at all accepting the myth of the pagan world view that underlay it. (For example, the word *tehom*, the deep, in Genesis 1:2 is derived from the name of one of the principal figures in the Babylonian creation myth. The word brings with it certain connotations to which the writer wishes to allude. Yet the Babylonian myth is clearly not being accepted as such.)

Because we fundamentalists cling to the rationalist thought categories of the last two centuries, we have even distorted the doctrine of the inspiration of Scriptures. We judge whether or not the Bible has “contradictions.” But our definition of that word derives from modern scientism rather than from the world of the Bible. We speak of “infallibility” as if the Chronicle of the Old Testament must fulfill the criteria of modern historiography. The trouble with us “literalists” is not that we are too biblical; the trouble is that we have not become biblical enough. We are too much the children of our age, afflicted by the shallowness (and strength) of the almost-modern mind, to make good our claim that we are biblicalists. (The same criticism must be made of the modernists.)

Our modern ways of thinking are also forms which must be affirmed—and which must be overcome. We can only overcome them by entering into the forms of past ages and other peoples. We will have to learn the languages and study what scholars have discovered. But, finally, as we study the Scriptures together, really using them, we will have to depend on the moving of the Holy Spirit to speak in and through the written words. For even these long-hallowed words are, as natural objects, dead forms unless the Spirit causes them to live for us as they have lived for others throughout the centuries of the church. And then they will again become a “. . . two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, . . . a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

3. BEYOND THE LAW . . . TOWARD SONSHIP

Most of us, perhaps, have made our peace with the systems. We hardly imagine that there is something more important to us or our church than an honored name, a satisfactory image, an attractive “package.” After all, our forefathers worked hard to make it possible for us to “live the good life.” Let us now gather our children around us and enjoy the many things we think we have well earned.

But there is the rub. The children are not satisfied with the forms we have provided. They have all too often gone through the form-conversion and the ritual baptism. But then comes emptiness. So they rebel against the nuts we have so thoughtfully provided, and they find that even the rebellion (unless they are very intelligent or imaginative) is also a ritual to lead them back to orthodoxy.

But there are other young people who, for various reasons (not the least of which is their sincere attempt to avoid sins of any sort), do not follow this well-marked route. Oddly enough it is from this group that the more deeply troubled come. It is from this group that those come who discover that sin is a great deal more terrible than can be expressed in drinking and smoking and formulating. It is quite likely the sensitive and pious “good” boy who comes to the shattering understanding of the force of evil that is in us. It is from those that the future of our church depends. Without them, we may continue to exist. But we will not live.

Perhaps what I mean can be clarified by borrowing the language a professor of mine once used when explaining the difference between the views of St. Augustine and Pelagius. Pelagius thought that man was a free agent who could choose whether or not, in any situation, he would do the right. What a man then needs is to “have courage to say ‘no.’” This interpretation is compatible with the idea that sins are either “dos” or “don’ts.”

St. Augustine disagreed. Man does not simply come to a sin situation. Even if, in any given situation, a man should choose not to commit a certain sin, he nevertheless chooses as a sinner. Man cannot choose not to be a sinner. His very choice of what he conceives to be good is the expression of a sinner who is such from his birth. Even man’s attempt to be moral, his attempt to escape his sinfulness, is the act of a will that is already distorted. Indeed, one must say that man’s attempt to be good is the expression of his deepest and most subtle sinfulness. Only radical grace can free man from his guilt.

I suspect that Anabaptists have always been carriers of an overstrong dose of Pelagian doctrine due to an uncritical carryover from Renaissance humanism. In any case, we have found it easy to oversimplify sin into cases of doing and not-doing. And by this we have been satisfied with a shallow understanding of sin—and, therefore, a shallow understanding of grace.

Before Maturity We Need the Law

And yet, we must begin as children with the “do” and “don’t.” Until we reach the maturity of sonship, we
need the guidance of the law. Through the forms of the law, we will come to understand the essential guilt that goes beyond lawbreaking — until we are ready to receive the grace that goes beyond law-keeping.

How then shall we find this grace? As I have already stated, our great-grandfathers found salvation in a climactic conversion experience which assured them that their sins had been forgiven and in which the decision was made to turn from one form of life to another. This decision meant a complete turn-around. Although there may have been later crises and further growth, this experience was basically unrepeatable.

We have seen, however, that this conversion form has a different meaning among children raised in godly homes. They are taught from birth to follow the same life-form that our fathers adopted late in life as a special call from God. The children's problem is to continue a process whose beginnings they cannot remember, for it preceded their birth in the resolve of their parents.

God can relate Himself to us in appropriate ways at every age. (Do we not witness to this with our talk of guardian angels?) We do not begin a relationship with Him when we exercise the will to believe. God Himself has begun before we willed. It is by His working that the desire for Him arose. It is by His moving that our faith was born. We respond; the initiative is His. When does His initiative begin? When we were born? At conception? Was it not before the “foundation of the world” that He began to know us and to choose us (Eph. 1:4; Gal. 1:15)?

God has always been at work, redeeming the world unto Himself. In human history, among our events and our forms, He has acted to move forward His plan and to reveal its meaning. In the event of Jesus Christ (using form to transcend form), He conquered all the systems that raised themselves against their Creator.

Do we want an exact date when we were saved? Perhaps that is the wrong question. Perhaps what we are given is a time (or times) when the meaning of God’s salvation was revealed to us in the event (or events) by which our standing before God was raised to our awareness in a living faith.

Do we still want a date for our salvation? To find one we would do better to keep our eyes fixed on that event which we proclaim to be the center of history, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (The Apostle Paul never seems to think of “salvation” as an act completed on earth; it was a process to be “worked out with fear and trembling.” But we do not live in fear. What has taken place once-and-for-all is our justification before God. This took place on the Cross.)

But this was an event with more than natural meaning. It was also a revelation of the meaning of all events. God has always worked in this world through people and processes that seem irrelevant and futile. Not in the wise and powerful, but in the loving sacrifice of those who are His people has He sustained His world. Here is the meaning of nonresistance. This is God’s method of redeeming the creation. It has always been a scandal, the scandal of the Cross. And yet, the Cross is the very clue to history.

But this deeply offends our natural sense that power should be expressed in strength and not in weakness. The call to become followers of Christ, to also take up the way of suffering love, the way of the Cross, is the call to die to ourselves. When we realize the meaning of this call, there is certain to be a crisis or a series of crises.

For an adult pagan, the initial crisis is quite certainly the crucial one. But children who grow up in Christian homes will almost certainly experience this in a series of crises.

Each child comes into the world believing himself to be the center of the universe, the sovereign lord of all that he surveys. The meaning of the training we give to a child is that we are removing him from such a total selfishness. We must civilize him, teaching him that we are all centers of the universe and that we must therefore respect each other’s rights. The training in a Christian home goes even farther. It is designed to show the child that, finally, none of us are centers of the universe; only God can take that place.

And so the child is taught to live the style of life that is thought to characterize the Christian. There are fearful battles with the stubborn will that by the time the child is old enough to be taught our set of beliefs, he has quite likely had his self molded into the form approved by our society.

But the willful ego does not disappear. Again and again it asserts itself against the voice of our society (now internalized in his conscience). And so there is guilt and the need for forgiveness and the need for a conscious affirmation that one chooses to be what one has always been trained to be. The child must himself ratify the decision once made for him by his parents.

As the child grows, his understanding and his capability expands. The capacity for self-assertion grows also. His boundaries expand, and he learns of other styles of life. We have already seen how he is forced to question and to explore. And so there will be other crises. Only those who cease to grow (and are therefore dead) will cease to have “conversion” or “rededication” experiences.

Growth Toward Sonship Has No Fixed Pattern

No doubt we would prefer to think that growth should come as steady progress. But even physically we grow by spurts. There are plateaus in all learning when we seem to make no progress. Then, suddenly the assimilated drill work produces a jump in skill and comprehension. Perhaps the growth was there throughout. But we became aware of it, it became available to us in revelatory moments. And so there continue to be “crisis” experiences, deeply emotional reaffirmations that God is certainly our Father and that we have met Him at a higher level.

Perhaps sometimes the spiritual “new man” is built up so gradually within us that we are aware of no moment when we first recognized its presence. We have all heard testimonies by those who live in faith but yet are unable to give a date when that faith was first recognized. Perhaps there are saints who simply keep growing in their Christian life without periods of rebellion and doubt.
What then can we say about the experience which the child of six or ten claims is his conversion? Unless the child has been emotionally overwhelmed, we need not question the validity of the experience. Nor should we deny its importance. But neither should we pretend that it is something that it is not. I do not think that its importance rests in its character as an isolated event which guarantees the future. It seems to me that its final meaning can rest only in the fulfillment through life of the promise that is here sincerely made: that this person has chosen to walk and to grow in the way to which God is calling him.

With every step of growth along this way, the person will deepen and shift the analogies by which he understood himself at lesser levels. Here also the need for many forms and models is made clear. The system by which we understood one level cannot always help us to the next. The theology that moved us in primary Sunday school classes cannot entirely go with us into adolescence. Nor do adolescent forms move as a transition. We need a multitude of levels in our church to speak to the multitude of our conditions.

It is disturbing to lose the simplicities of childhood. Yet it is necessary to deanthropomorphize the childhood image of a whiskered old man with lightning streaking from his finger (just as, later, it will be necessary to return to some of the anthropomorphic ways of speaking, knowing that they are both inadequate and inescapable). It is necessary to discover that Christianity does not solve all our problems, answer all our questions, or protect us from the necessity of shouldering a cross.

Those who would grow must suffer. But it is to those deeply disturbed ones who discover the meaning of sin that the deeper discoveries of the meaning of grace will also come. It is these who discover that even our Mennonite Brethren—Christian way of life, however pieous it may be, is just another form, another system. As a way that is accepted as the best among alternate ways, as an end in itself, our Mennonite Brethren "style" is just another form of worldliness. Ultimately, all our cultural forms are of this world. Only after we have been saved from our pious forms will we be able to receive these forms again. We will not see them anymore as absolutes for all mankind, but as God's gracious gift and live command to us. Then this way will be our free calling, not our childish slavery to a law. Then we will surely know who is our Father—and that we are His sons.

4. BEYOND THE BUREAUCRAT; THE PRIEST AND PROPHET AS POET

A priest is a mediator between God and men. He expresses man's deepest thoughts to God and he is the mediator of the sacraments by which the grace of God is transmitted to men. The Reformation did not intend to abandon the priesthood. It meant to assert that we are all priests. All of us can bring to God our deepest yearnings. And all of us can help each other speak to God.

But we need help to understand our deeper thoughts. That is why we have always needed spokesmen. And we need someone to evoke with us the possibilities of a deeper experience with God. As priests together we are the sacramental mediators of God's presence to each other.

A prophet is a man with a special message from God. He has an insight or a command which we have not yet understood. Such a man must know how to shape words and acts so that we are lifted beyond ourselves, so that we can feel, as well as hear, the majesty of the divine Word.

Poetry is the attempt to use words to express the deep stirrings within a man. A poem should help someone exclaim, "Yes, that is what I felt; but I could never put it into words." This is its priestly function. Beyond this power to express our common feelings, the poet is often sensitive to depths and meanings beyond our normal ken. Then he shapes his words and music in such a way that he drives us to see what he also saw and to feel what he has felt. This is his prophetic function. Poetry has a sacramental purpose. It is man's attempt to say the unsayable, to evoke what cannot be expressed.

Prophets speak forth their poetry. (All the prophets of the Old Testament were poets.) Priests embody their poetry in their liturgies and chant it in their songs. (Perhaps our lack of a liturgical tradition plus the loss of our original language is the cause for our concentration on singing.)

One does not need to write rhyming lines to be a poet. But one must sense the rhythms in our speech and know the images that open up our understanding. (I do not call the kind of popular doggerel written by Edgar Guest and Annie Flint Johnson poetry; though I suppose, on my own principles, I shall have to allow it as a preliminary level that reaches some.) With this as our definition, we can see that our early spokesmen fulfilled the functions of the poet. They were the ones who were able to discern the meanings behind our experiences and to reshape our stumbling words in fluent, forceful speech.

We Have Lost Our Poets

But when our church achieved the shift from "living in" an experience to "talking about" it, the fluid freshness of poetic modes hardened into our own "evangelical" forms of ritual cant. Some speakers seem incapable of putting ten consecutive words together that do not include some dead cliche.

With this shift, the sermon also took on a different function. Our meanings had been made explicit; they had largely been codified. The repetition of settled meanings does not attract the natural poet. But it does attract the more prosaic men, who, as we have seen, inherited our institutions. These men are more attracted to systematic theologies than to living experience. They are more at home with established certainties than with the uncharted regions of the soul.

And so, subtly, the nature of the sermon changes. They are more and more governed by outlines (preferably with three points). They tend to parrot and expound "the wider implications" of sets of propositions. They do not so much evoke a mood as explain a point. Stories and experiences are less used. Moreover they are not parables and allegories any more; they become
illustrations. An illustration is an otherwise irrelevant incident which serves the function of clarifying a point.

How different was the use of parable and allegory in the hands of poets like Jesus and the prophetical Parables do not discuss a proposition; they open up a new realm of thought. The parables of Jesus and the prophets were not culled from the Aramaic Digest or books of anecdotes. They were taken from the soil of common life. They did not clarify; they mystified the hearers. Such parables forced the hearers to think about reality in a new way. They were stories to remember and mull over. They had more meanings than could be expressed in word. They called forth a new outlook. Like a joke, a parable cannot be "explained" without losing some of its power to startle the mind into a deeper comprehension. As Jesus often repeated, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." It takes a special sense to "hear" a meaning that cannot be put in explanations or in propositions. No wonder Jesus was discouraged at times by his dull disciples. "What, you also have not understood?"

It is more difficult to be a prophet and a priest today than it was for our forebears. We are confused and stammering at many levels. Our teachers must be willing to explore our questions with us, helping us put into words those things which we half-understand. When they do this, they will also draw us when they speak the Word of God. "Come, see a man, who told me all things that ever I did; is not this the Christ? Then they went out of the city, and came to him."

We will never know "all things" in the heart of another. And so we must sit together, each one willing to take from the secrets of his heart that will help us in our common search. As we do this, we will, leader and led, minister to each other the presence of Christ. For where we are gathered together in prayer, He is also there. And He knows all that ever we did. Is this not the meaning of the brotherhood that was rediscovered by our Anabaptist fathers?

For this to become reality, we do not need men who have all the answers. Those who can help us will be those who can evoke meanings and relationships by the power of their love and humbleness and integrity. They are more likely to tell us about their own history than expound theology. When they have spoken, we will not so much know what they said as we will know that a presence has been mediated. For we will have been touched beyond the saying of it. They will also have felt the ambiguities and the struggle of life. No doubt they will have suffered deeply. Out of their own doubt and struggle and faith, they will touch us with faith and hope and love.

5. TOWARD BROTHERHOOD
Beyond Simplicity

The old form of leadership, in its time and place, achieved impressive results. But we cannot simply translate the old forms into the present. The specific methods and answers for a particular time and place are often irrelevant in a new time or place. We need not carry over all the old specifics, but we need to discover the old spirit. Grounding ourselves in the past, we must learn to do in our own way for our time what our grandparents achieved in their own way in their time.

But it is not for me, or for any one else, to spell out what should be the new methods and the new answers. These must grow out of our present experiences, just as the descriptions and systems developed by our fathers grew out of their experiences.

What was essential for our fathers were not the specific forms and answers which were given. What was essential was their experience with God and the honest commitment by all members of the brotherhood to search out the mind of Christ through prayer and Bible study and a common waiting for the Spirit of God to move in the church.

We may as well get used to the fact that the consensus of the past will never be restored. Nor will there ever be a new consensus in which we will think alike on all important topics. Instead we will have to develop several levels of consensus matching, to some extent, our stages of maturity and the differences in our economic and cultural settings. And we will need forms and institutions appropriate for each of these levels.

Much of what I am saying can be expressed in a story. Some time ago I spent a Sunday with friends who have three girls between five and eleven years of age. Part of the afternoon was spent on the floor playing a version of "Old Maid" with plastic tiles which had animals pictured on them. The loser ended with a lone tile bearing the image of a skunk and the title, "Little Stinker." Several months later I visited these friends again. Again we played games on the floor. And the youngest girl quite appropriately expressed her friendship by sitting on my lap.

But if I return in ten years it will be most inappropriate to express continuing friendship by playing "Little Stinker" on the floor. And our relationship would be most uncomfortably strained were I to take her on my lap. We must then find quite different and more complex forms to express continuing appreciation for each other.

Here it is obvious that the situation has changed, and it is not too difficult to understand the meaning of the change and the different responses that are required. The specific games we played were not important. Sitting-on-my-lap was not important. These were temporary expressions of a relationship of trust and friendship. As these girls grow up, new forms, new games, new expressions will be needed—so that the important thing can continue, the relationship of trust and friendship.

So is it also with us as a conference. The old specifics and the old forms were meaningful, not in themselves, but as expressions of a relationship of trust and love. This relationship was the essential consensus that went deeper than any of its external forms. This relationship included the entire brotherhood and found its final meaning in its relationship to Christ.

Those who despair before these complexities plead for us to return to the "simple faith," as if we could go on playing games appropriate to children. They believe that our sophistication is robbing us of a victori-
ous faith. And they are partly, hopefully temporarily, right. But their appeal is both ambiguous and impossible.

What they mean by “simple faith” is a complex of a devout assurance that God is with us, an uncomplicated outlook on life (Unschuldigkeit), and a less complex social structure. To the simple life of the old-time farm community we can never return. Nor to the simple outlook can we return except at the cost of our own selves. Education, whether we like it or not, will reveal the relativity of this world and all its forms just as it shows us the ambiguities in all our bravest statements. And education we must have. Those who refuse to question “because it might shake their faith” are precisely the ones who testify by this that they have no faith to begin with.

The Wilderness Is in Our Soul

Yes, we can win back the simple trust that God is with us and that He worketh all things well. But this will come to those who have the courage to face the fact that we will never again have a “simple” society or a “simple” outlook on life. We will again find the simplicity of trust in God, but we will find it only on the other side of all our complexities. We must go through the deserts to win the oases on the other side. Our fathers had the courage to face unknown wildernesses in the new America. With God, they came with courage. Our wildernesses are inside our souls. With God’s help we will again be found. In all of this, we need not know the final despair, for God is with us on this quest. Behold, it is His doing and He doeth all things well.

Once we face this, I have faith that we will once again discover an essential consensus. This consensus will not be marked by cultural peculiarities (though we need not give them all up). It will not be marked by the assumption that we possess all the truth that is worth knowing. It will not assume that we are more holy than others or that we have a special claim on the Gospel. It will not even trust, in detail, the answers by which we have so far lived.

We will have to admit openly that we are perplexed. We will have to speak as openly of our doubts as we do of our certainties. We need to become brothers again, each of us taking responsibility for melting away the fear and suspicion that surrounds us. And as we are humbled together before God and each other, we will be able to begin again to search the Scriptures together and to help each other realize the meaning of the experiences that have overtaken us. Even though many of the difficult questions will not have been automatically answered, God will grant us grace to find a new level of relationship, of trust and love, with God and with each other.

In this common quest we will rediscover our consensus, a consensus that is better expressed by the relationship in which we stand than by the “answers” that are found. That consensus will not have all the same forms or content as did the consensus of fifty or a hundred years ago. We are poor sons if we have not grown beyond our fathers. Nor will we be likeminded on all points. But we will have found a consensus of Christian discipleship that will help us accept each other even though we are at different points along the way to becoming the sons and heirs of God. Then we will discover that our basic consensus is only Christ Himself, who is the end of our journey as He was the beginning and who is standing by to give us grace to walk the paths we do not always understand.

The Old Wine Is Best

Nevertheless this new consensus will, in the most important sense, fulfill the meaning that our fathers found in their consensus. We will once again find it is the old wine “which is the best.” For it will again express a genuine relationship to God and to each other, a relationship of love, of openness, of trust, and, therefore, of faith—a faith made stronger by the testing of the present and the deeper realization of that continuing work that God is effecting in us.

The grace that we will find in such a consensus will also take on forms and develop institutions. And these will tend to glorify themselves. To some extent, the cycles will remain. But we need not all follow the same cycle. If we have many forms and if we live at many levels, then grace may always find a channel. Some of our institutions will calcify, but others will be alive and fresh. Later on, what was once hardened will be driven to humility and fresh grace.

And, once again, there will be need for all of us to become leaders. We will not all address ourselves to the overall problems as we did in the past. But we will all find areas in which our direction and responsibility are needed. We may then rediscover in exciting ways, the priesthood of all believers and the importance of the brotherhood.

And all of us will find again (probably in small groups within large churches) the power and grace to confess our sins one to another and pray one for another—-that we may be healed.

Beyond Image-Building

But I have given dangerous advice. The deep sharing I want can easily degenerate into the rot of deliberate togetherness. All too quickly “honesty” and “sharing” become a kind of “peeping Tom” curiosity. That which is at one moment one of the deepest gifts of life becomes, at the next moment, shameless spiritual strip-tease or psychic rape.

We will find ourselves and share deeply with each other, not when we are concentrating on our own or our neighbor’s naked souls, but when we are sharing a common task and when we are focused on Him who is our center.

But what is our common task? Finding a way to recreate our close communities? Preaching our sets of explanations? Multiplying our numbers and our emptiness? Establishing ourselves in the good things of life? Other youth are searching for a cause, marching for civil rights, and joining the Peace Corps. Is it our purpose to get high-paying jobs and a house in a nice suburb? Who are we? Can we agree on the reason for our existence?
The Mission of the Church

Our fathers have always had an answer. From the very beginning they have claimed that our task was the preaching of the Gospel to our neighbors and to the whole world.

Our early brethren in Russia even witnessed to their Russian neighbors in the face of flat government prohibitions against such proselyting. This kind of home missions died out almost entirely with emigration to America.

Our people were too busy carving out estates and building a culture to reach their “English” neighbors. Churches were conducted in German; and we were noted for the closeness of our communities, not for the warmth of our welcome. In compensation, perhaps, we shifted our attention to foreign lands where we could satisfy our need to feel that we were witnessing. Nor was there any danger that the converts would corrupt our German culture.

Having established ourselves here (which was actually our primary task), we have, within the last thirty years or so, reawakened to the need for evangelism at home. But it has been almost impossible for our established communities to make “outsiders” a part of our group. Because of our desire to grow and our guilt because we have not accepted others, we go through elaborate gestures which, so far, have accomplished little.

Four years ago the Southern District Conference solemnly voted to begin a drive to increase by five percent per year for five years, a resolution that has had no noticeable effect on its membership rolls. At present we are entering a Decade of Enlargement. One can hardly be confident that it will be a success. (I am not even sure that it ought to be.)

Our established churches will go through some of the motions of outreach, but I have yet to meet anyone who really believes that the churches of Hillsboro, Reedley, Corn, Adams, Hedges, Henderson, or Mountain Lake are going to grow significantly. This leaves things up to the newer city churches.

Unfortunately, I do not believe that we can expect these new churches to do what our older communities are not able to do. We will remember that when our fathers moved to America, the first several generations were preoccupied with the problem of establishing themselves in the new land. They were not only absorbed with poverty, but also with the need to restructure their cultural patterns and customs to a form appropriate to their new setting. These things cannot be done in a day and not in a generation either.

More than most of us may realize, the move from a Mennonite farming community to a modern town is almost as great (if not greater) a shift as that experienced by our fathers. Once again it is necessary to restructure our ways and our character to the demands of a new setting. It will very likely take a generation or so to make the adjustment.

Meanwhile, it is rather optimistic to expect our young people in the cities to be able to accommodate large numbers of converts. A man who has grown up within one kind of community knows who he is within the limits of that community. He knows what is expected of him and he knows “his place.” But when that man moves to a radically different setting, the boundaries by which he defined himself are removed. He now does not know quite who he is or what can legitimately be expected of him. Nor can he tell when he has “arrived,” for the definition of success is unclear. Since our people have always been workers, his typical response is to work very hard. But there are few limits to the possibilities of the city. And hard work is not always the way to success. So he cannot always tell whether or not he has succeeded.

With such large personal problems for them to face, one can predict (a prediction based on meager evidence) that the result will often be anxiety, depression, and an increasing number of emotional breakdowns. Without a major miracle, I do not believe that we can look to our city churches for a breakthrough in outreach. (Those new churches which begin with a large proportion of non-Low German names on the charter roll may escape some of this problem. But then they will have the problem of relating themselves meaningfully to the rest of the conference.)

I believe the implications are clear. Our churches are not “filling stations” to which members repair on Sundays for recharging so that they can spend the week in witnessing to those they meet. Our churches are not, and have never been, particularly effective centers of evangelistic outreach. Not, at any rate, of the sort of outreach that would lead to the growth of our own church. We have participated in jail services, gospel teams, Christian businessmen’s groups, and the like, but these seldom were tied to the church in such a way that members were added to it.

Is Relevancy Our Mission?

What then is our mission? How can our churches be centers of outreach when they need first to be schools and hospitals? For we need to mature and we need to be readier. We will hardly have the right to preach to others as long as we ourselves are as poor and needy as those we thought to help.

What this will mean for us I do not know. I am not sure that keeping true to the road God sets before us will mean popularity and the gathering in of grateful throngs. God has given us a distinctive road. He has not given us our past as Mennonites just so we can escape its meaning in a kind of generalized evangelicalism. I cannot believe that we are meant to give up our rich Anabaptist moorings for the pretentious fumbling of the National Association of Evangelicals and the doomed rationalism of too many modern fundamentalists or the jingoistic heresies of anti-communist preachers of capitalistic patriotism as the gospel for today.

Perhaps God has not meant for us to win the masses. But I am completely sure that He wants us to be obedient. And surely obedience means holding to the heritage and truth that has been given to us. Perhaps He does not mean for us to be obviously “relevant.”

If we must also become purveyors of images to a world that is absorbed only in its packaging, then will
Many prophets have been unpopular and anguished and, it seemed, irrelevant. Later on it was realized that they had been the authentic voice of God. It is not pleasant to preach that doom is coming. We would prefer a message that would bless the noblest of our present dreams. But it is only the preachers of judgment (and not all of them) who will have earned the right to speak of hope after the doom has fallen and the despair has come. Perhaps God has troops He holds in reserve.

Though our fathers were simplistic in their definition of what separation means, they may well have been right to stress its importance. "Be peculiar... be separate... be holy" is God's call. If the spirit of this age is activity piled up in activity and the frenetic chase to "succeed," then perhaps it is time to withdraw, to "be still and know that I am God." If the frantic chase is the "spirit of our age," then is it not the final distortion to discover it in the church? It is often to the desert that prophets go to hear again the Word of God. Perhaps from such a place of stillness we will hear again the call of God to speak. And perhaps, after this civilization has crumbled about us, men will know that God has kept His own who have not bowed the knee to Baal.

Toward Love

I do not know. Certainly I do not want to provide an excuse for laziness. We will have to help each other find ourselves and find our task. But to do that we will have to become honest. And that is the hardest thing of all. Perhaps it will come only after we are broken— and have nothing left to lose. We naturally do not wish to be broken. And yet, is that not the lesson of the Cross? "Not by might nor by power." Perhaps it is only the broken who have a message for today's shattering world. Perhaps only those who have not "known their place" can speak to a world in which all are becoming displaced persons. Perhaps we shall yet discover that witnessing is, in the words of D. T. Niles, "... one beggar telling another beggar where he can find bread."

No Cause Will Save Us

Of one thing I am sure. No cause will save us from ourselves. Neither will dogmas or principles or forms or systems or institutions or ideologies. All of these, like the Sabbath, have been made for man, not man for them.

Christianity delivers us from these. Our "cause" is not an abstraction or a principle or a program. Let us be forever suspicious of "crusades" which run roughshod over the lives and sensibilities of people in the name of some shining "truth." Our truth is God Himself, not God in the abstract, but made real as a person. We are delivered from "causes" to a fellowship with a heavenly Father. We have been delivered from our guilt through the love of Jesus Christ. Having been loved, we find the grace to love ourselves. Having found ourselves, we are free to love our neighbors. Our cause is no ideal. It is a "He" through whom we discover all other "he's" whose needs can then be met by the resources God has given us. And who is our neighbor? When Jesus was asked that question, He did not respond with a principle or a doctrine. He answered, "There was a man..."

And yet, the dogmas, principles, forms, systems, and institutions have been made for man. They are necessary channels of grace and life. Sometimes, in affirming their relativity, we forget that God has given them to us to meet our necessity. We even need them to go beyond them. They are not life to us, and yet they can transmit that life. And their emptiness can drive us to seek that life.

This essay is also a systematization. It attempts to think about these things. It even attempts to think about our thinking about. No doubt others will then think about the way in which I have been trying to think about our ways of thinking about. We need this sort of sophistication, not because we shall find the truth through all these efforts, but because they will help us to understand our systems. And these efforts will force us to understand that all analyses, like all forms, are only relatively helpful. Pushed to the limit, they can drive us back, not to the experience but to the understanding of the necessity of primary experience and thus to the openness of those who await once again the moving of the Spirit through the rituals of our works and days.

In slower times, our forms changed so slowly that one could think that they did not change at all. Today the opposite danger threatens us. Now change is so rapid that the only constancy seems to be the certainty of change itself. If this is what is happening, then the results will certainly become demonic. Change as a way of life robs life of meaning. Then no form will be taken seriously enough, or last long enough, to deliver to man the life and meaning that it carries. Having defeated the demon of false absolutisms, we may yet awaken to discover that our empty house has been filled with several demons more wicked than the first.

But, for many of us, the first demon is still our demon, the one that binds andchokesthe and destroys us. Too many are dying in what have become their rats. But God does not want to let us stay in rats, even safe ones. No doubt many of the bumps of life are meant to jar us out of these rats. Even our own soul conspires against us. Deep within us is a constant protest against becoming robots. In response to this conflict, many of us become neurotic or worse. These symptoms and fears are the price we pay for our "security."

Things Are No Substitute for God

We yearn for life, for love, for genuine relationships with each other and with God. Too often our code hampers us. We are afraid to express our real selves, afraid either of what we would see in ourselves or at what our neighbors would think were they to see us. And so we turn to things to take the place of persons. We become absorbed in our jobs, or our machines, or our hobbies, or in our quest to pile field on field. This is our materialism, the turning from personal relationships to relationships to things. But things are shoddy substitutes; they give us nothing in return. And so we turn back to people again and, sometimes, to what we
hope is God. But the thing-habit is upon us, and we treat even them as things.

And so, in our desperation, we turn to illicit sex (the attempt to touch a person while treating him or her as a thing). Or we turn to religious fanaticism of one sort or another (the attempt to touch God by reducing Him to a thing, a system of some sort whereby we can righteouslie clobber all who do not agree with us. This thing-response characterizes all extremes of the right or the left. It is also seen in those Bible-prophecy movements which try to reduce God's actions in history to a detailed system to which they have the key). But whichever route is followed, the result is chaos and emptiness. We cannot live as things.

I believe that we are already far down these roads. I believe that scandal and fanaticism will increasingly trouble us. I believe that many of us are in for a personal shattering. But I also believe that there is hope. To the broken pieces may come again a humbling and a healing. To the dry bones of our drained lives can come the reviving touch of the Holy Spirit. To our shame will come the miracle of God's forgiveness. And sinners shall yet again behold and tremble, saying, “Behold, how they love one another.”

But for how great a remnant will this be true? For eighteen men? I do not know. But I believe that those who retain the courage to accept life and to think and pray deeply on these things are the ones who can lift us above our cycles of fall and restoration to a steadier vision of what it means to be the Church of God—and from the need for another (futile?) break and reformation.

A CONCLUDING PARABLE

(In the Scriptures and among early Christians, the Church was often symbolized by the image of the boat. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.)

Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out for fear. But immediately he spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I; have no fear.”

And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent round to all that region and brought to him all that were sick, and besought him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were made well. (Matthew 14:22-36 RSV)